

Not to the Manor Born

by Good_Witch

Now Complete

Written for nothingness101, as her SSHG Exchange BINGO prize. She requested: "A slightly fluffy Christmas romance which is a call back to the pureblood Snape of pre HBP. Basic story line about how Snape and Hermione get together, and I'd prefer a post war story. Thinking formal ball(s), formal courting, curtses, formal address (Lord and Lady), maybe some family jewels (and maybe some Snape family to go with them). Please feature a frisky drunk Snape and lots and lots o' lemons."----I did my best!

AU post OotP, the tale of how Snape and Hermione helped defeat the Dark Lord, how their relationship developed, and how Snape Manor came into play.

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Prologue

Chapter 1 of 11

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Harry waited anxiously for Dumbledore to collect him, eager to join his friends at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place and have something to distract him from dwelling on Sirius's death in the Department of Mysteries several weeks before. When they finally arrived in the crowded, dark house, Dumbledore led the adults into the kitchen for an Order meeting, and Harry followed Ron and Hermione up to Ron's bedroom to get caught up on what had been happening since he had seen them last.

Sulking, Harry said, "Well, nice of you lot to keep in touch. Not like I've been stuck in that jail of a house with nothing to think about except Sirius or anything."

Hermione pursed her lips in sympathy and laid a hand on his arm. "We're sorry, Harry, honestly! We've not been allowed to write about anything the Order has been working on in case the post gets intercepted. But they've said that we'll all be filled in after they have tonight's meeting. That's why they wanted to fetch you. So you could be told."

Ron nodded vigorously. "Yeah, mate, something big has come up; they're all a fair bit excited about it."

Harry heaved a put-out sigh and rolled his eyes, unwilling to let go of his pique so quickly. "We'll see."

They sat in awkward silence for a long while, until they heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Remus poked his head in the open door and smiled. "Come along. They're ready for you now."

Harry was surprised to see that the kitchen was empty save for Dumbledore and Snape...they apparently being those who were ready for them. Remus inclined his head and ducked back out, shutting the door behind him. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sank into seats along one side of the long table, facing Snape on the other side. Dumbledore, at the head of the table, spoke up.

"Thank you for your patience and for joining us now."

Harry glanced between the older men, wary and angry. He wanted nothing more than to scream at Snape for not helping save Sirius, but kept his mouth firmly shut in deference to the headmaster.

"Professor Snape has some very important information for us that will be a great advantage in defeating You-Know-Who."

Hermione frowned in thought and said, "Why aren't you using his name, sir? I thought that fear of a name only promotes fear of the thing itself."

Dumbledore inclined his head and smiled. "That's true, Miss Granger. However, I am refraining in deference to Professor Snape, as that is more comfortable for him."

All eyes turned to Snape, who merely stared stonily back at them.

Dumbledore looked expectantly at Snape and said, "Now then, why don't you tell them what you've already told the Order?"

Snape straightened in his chair and said, "I have discovered a potion that will be beneficial to our cause, and you three are crucial to its success."

The three teenagers exchanged surprised looks and turned back to Snape. Hermione spoke up for them. "Of course, we'll do whatever is necessary to help defeat You-Know-Who. How can we help?"

Snape sat back, adopting his classroom lecture demeanour, and said, "The potion takes an entire year to brew...thirteen full moons, to be precise. It is extremely finicky and requires many rare ingredients. Of course, with the resources the headmaster has at his disposal, and with my skills, these are not the hurdles one might expect them to be. However, there is a hurdle. A rather large one. It is the purpose and effect of the potion. You are not of age yet, but you will likely be of age by the time the potion is used. The decision to use the potion is not one to be made lightly."

Rather breathless, Hermione asked, "What does it do?"

Snape remained silent as he surveyed the three youths across from him. Watching them like a hawk, he said, "It combines the powers of all who participate into one person, giving him the strength and magical ability of all of them at once."

Their eyes went round, and Ron immediately asked, "How long does it last?"

"It lasts until the participants end the effects."

Harry's eyes glowed green as he pictured victory, his anger at Snape dissipating in the face of this news. "Brilliant! I don't care *how* powerful he is, there's no way he can be equal to three people!"

Hermione jumped on the tail of his statement, the tone of her voice courting caution, and said, "But what are the effects on the people whose powers are being borrowed?"

Snape paused, letting the fleetingly excited moment sober before murmuring, "They would be left as Squibs until their powers were returned to them by the target." The trio exchanged deflated looks, which turned to horror as Snape continued, "And if the target is killed while still in possession of their powers, they will remain as Squibs."

Harry rocked back in his seat as if he had been hit in the chest, and Dumbledore said, "You see why this is such a serious decision..."

Hermione interrupted, her brow furrowed in concentration. "If this is such a valuable potion, and we can use it on our side, what's to stop the other side from doing the same thing? Even if Professor Snape managed to not brew it for them, surely they could find someone who could manage it. And You-Know-Who could just pile up scores of followers to use to augment himself!"

She looked up at Snape in terror, and he surprised them all by actually quirked a grim half-smile. "Miss Granger, you are quite right in your extrapolation but for one small, vital thing."

Dumbledore beamed at them and leant forward, his hands clasped on the table. "As I've said all along, we have one thing that You-Know-Who doesn't and never will have. And that makes all the difference."

Harry blinked at the old man. "What? What do we have?"

Snape's voice was very low as he said, "Love."

The trio stared at Snape, taken aback by the gentleness of that word from his lips. In a whisper, Hermione said, "How does that work, Professor?"

"The potion can only work with those who love each other. The stronger the love, the more effective the link. The Dark Lord doesn't know love. Even if his followers loved him, his inability to love would poison the link and render it useless."

Hermione turned wide eyes to Harry, whose expression was fierce with determination even as his eyes were unfocused, showing him to be lost in thought. She glanced to Ron, and they locked gazes. Ron swallowed audibly but settled his shoulders and lifted his chin in a bid for courage. Hermione smiled faintly in approval and nodded. At her inquiring head tilt, Ron nodded back, and her smile widened before she turned back to the older men and spoke.

"We'll do it."

Harry snapped back to attention and scowled in alarm. "Hey, wait a minute! As tempting as it all sounds, I can't let you do that...what if something happens to me and you lose your magic?"

Ron piped up, "You can't stop us, mate. It's not your decision anyway, now is it? And if the worst happens, well then, Hermione and I can manage in the Muggle world, I reckon."

Hermione beamed at Ron for his staunch defence and added, "Ron's right, Harry. If we can do anything to end this war, it's worth it. And I lived as a Muggle for eleven years before coming to Hogwarts, so I can do it again if need be. As long as the people I care about can be safe and we can be rid of You-Know-Who for good, that's a sacrifice I'm willing to make."

Harry gaped at them, struggling with the danger they were signing up for. "But... I can't ask you to make that sacrifice..."

Ron smirked and punched Harry in the shoulder as he said, "Then, don't. We've made our decisions."

Hermione squeezed Harry's hand and murmured, "We can do this, Harry. All of us...together. The way it should be. We can end it. For good." At Harry's sigh of capitulation, she looked back to their professors and said, "Thank you for finding such an amazing opportunity, Professor Snape. If there's anything I can do to help you, I would be in your debt for the privilege."

As Snape opened his mouth to offer a scathing retort, Dumbledore cut him off, saying, "I think that would be a brilliant solution. Severus, Miss Granger will join you to learn about the potion at every stage of its brewing, and she will keep Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter in the loop as well. Considering how tricky this potion is, I daresay you could use a capable assistant."

Snape glared at Dumbledore, lips curling in impotent anger. "As you wish, Headmaster. The next full moon is Tuesday, July 30th, and the initial ingredients must be collected then. Miss Granger, I shall collect you from Grimmauld Place after dinner. Be ready."

Hermione nodded vigorously, eyes round with the import of her tasks. "Of course, Professor. Thank you."

Snape huffed and pushed back from the table. "I assume we're done here?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Thank you, Severus. I will make sure that everything you need for this venture is available to you." He turned a stern gaze on the silent teenagers. "And you three just need to make sure you stay out of trouble so you are all around when the potion is ready and we can use it to maximum effect."

Harry's nose wrinkled and he ran his hand through his hair as he said, "Yes, sir."

Ron and Hermione nodded agreement and Snape stood. Uttering a clipped, "Good night," he Flooed back to Hogwarts, leaving Dumbledore to twinkle at the trio.

"I must say, I am humbled by your devotion to your friend and to our world. It is a monumental task that you have been set, especially for such young people, but you have faced it with the sort of bravery that Godric Gryffindor himself would be proud to see. Thank you."

Ron and Hermione exchanged sheepish looks and mumbled thanks. Harry said, "We've got a lot to talk about. Good night, Headmaster."

Gripping their arms, Harry hauled them from the dining room and back up to the room he now shared with Ron. They shut the door and he whirled to face them, but no words came. Instead, he flung himself forward to embrace them, the tears that leaked out to wet their shoulders saying more than mere words could.

From Student to Assistant

Chapter 2 of 11

Now Complete

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August 30, 1996

Even though she was too young to be inducted into the Order, Hermione sat at the worn kitchen table in Grimmauld Place, surrounded by Order members at the last meeting before the school year started. She nodded solemnly at those who greeted her with pleasant but perplexed expressions, determined to be on her best behaviour under Snape's watchful eye.

There had been two full moons since he had told them about the potion, and they had gone out just a couple of nights before to collect ingredients under the light of the second full moon. Snape had informed her that she would be expected to be at the meeting, and she simply acquiesced, unwilling to ask why.

When the rest of the Order members were there, Dumbledore began the meeting by turning directly to Snape and saying, "Severus, is there a particular reason Miss Granger is here tonight?"

Snape inclined his head and said, "Yes. Miss Granger has been assigned to act as my assistant in the brewing of the potion I told you about last month. The process has progressed smoothly thus far, and she has performed capably enough. As she has also been designated as liaison between the Order and Mr. Potter, she shall relay the information I am about to share with you."

He paused to quirk one eyebrow at Hermione, who was staring at him in amazement that he had very nearly complimented her and in anticipation for his announcement.

"The Dark Lord has succumbed to my carefully spun tales about his link to Mr. Potter ever since the blood ritual after the Tri-Wizard Tournament. In an effort to scale back the danger that Mr. Potter faces, I have succeeded in convincing the Dark Lord that he must wait until Mr. Potter has reached the age of majority, after which, the longer he waits before killing him, the stronger Mr. Potter's power will be...that will be absorbed by the Dark Lord."

A susurrus of gasps swept the full kitchen, and Hermione's mouth dropped open in awe.

Snape allowed himself a small smirk of satisfaction before continuing. "Not only will the Dark Lord desist in his attempts to kill Mr. Potter...at least for the next year...he has also appointed *me* to... *protect* him... fattening him up for the slaughter, if you will." With that, he cut a knowing glance at Dumbledore, who blinked stonily back at him.

Hermione clapped a hand over her open mouth to stifle the excited noises that were bubbling up. The rest of the Order, however, had no qualms about that and exploded into intense conversations.

Snape scanned the room for a long moment, letting the excitement surge, before lifting a hand in a gesture for silence. All eyes snapped back to him and a hush fell over the group.

His voice was dark with warning as he said, "Yes, of course, this is good news for Mr. Potter. But this does not mean that the Dark Lord will sit idly by. He and the Death Eaters will still be working to infiltrate the Ministry, and the rest of us are still in as much danger as before. This is no time to let our defences go lax."

Dumbledore nodded. "Severus is right. While your accomplishment is indeed an astounding one, we must maintain, as Moody has often told us, 'constant vigilance!'"

The group burst forth again with vehement agreement, and Snape sat back in his chair, patently done with his revelations. He turned to see Hermione regarding him with bright, watery eyes. Frowning, he murmured, "Miss Granger?"

Hermione sucked in a quavery breath and swallowed. Settling her shoulders, she whispered, "Professor, I don't know how you did it again, but you're amazing! I can't wait to tell the boys; they'll be just as grateful as I am, I'm sure. Thank you, sir...for everything!"

Snape blinked, taken aback by her effusiveness. She was staring at him in near-adoration and he shifted his weight in the chair, trying not to squirm. Under the cover of the hubbub around them, he cleared his throat and murmured, "Yes, well... why don't you run along now and tell Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley the good news? I shall see you all at Hogwarts in two days, Miss Granger."

Hermione beamed and nodded, rising from her seat and clasping her hands to stop herself from gripping Snape's arm in an outpouring of thanks. "I will; right now. Thank you again, Professor. And good night!" She bobbed her head in retreat and added a quick farewell to the headmaster before sidling past the Order members and racing upstairs to the boys' room.

September 27, 1996

The next full moon saw Hermione reporting to Snape's office after dinner, at which point they Flooed away from Hogwarts so they could Apparate to the next site for gathering ingredients.

In the chill moonlight, Hermione broke the silence with a tentative, "Professor?"

Snape uttered a clipped, "Yes?"

Hermione sat back on her heels on the ground and passed her sleeve over her forehead, carefully avoiding getting earth from her gloves on her face. "I know you said that we were all still in danger, but... since I'm a Muggleborn, *and* I'm so close to Harry, just... how much danger am I really in?"

Snape deliberately stowed the roots he had dug up in the spell-enhanced carrier before allowing himself to meet her anxious eyes. Straightening his back, he levelled a sober gaze at Hermione before saying, "If a Death Eater could manage to get you separated from your protection, I doubt you would live much beyond a few hours of obligatory torture."

Hermione blanched, swallowing hard. Snape sighed. The last thing he wanted was to be saddled with a snivelling girl. But Hermione swallowed a few more times, took a couple of deep breaths, and then cleared her throat. "... appreciate your candid answer, sir."

She resumed digging in the damp earth, carefully avoiding scraping against the roots they were harvesting. Snape watched her, surprised and impressed at her ability to remain calm and focused after such disturbing news. Before he could reconsider, he said, "And I appreciate you not dissolving into tears, Miss Granger."

Hermione's head snapped up and she stared at him. Snape blinked. After a beat, Hermione's lips twitched into a lopsided smile, and she huffed a shaky laugh. "Thank you, sir. I'm trying to be as grown up as I can be, considering the circumstances."

Snape scoffed and said, "But you're a child..."

Hermione cut him off with a low, "I'm of age," her gaze dropping to the turned earth between them. Snape's grunt of disbelief made her lift her chin in defiance as she added, "Just over a week ago, as a matter of fact. Sir."

Snape stared at her, his mind making rapid calculations and coming up with results he didn't like. "Then you're in more danger than I realized."

Hermione shrugged and attempted a tone of nonchalance as she said, "But you said it yourself, as long as I'm protected, I'll be fine."

Snape scowled and said, "You're only protected when you're at Hogwarts."

Hermione tilted her head, smiled, and said, "I'm not at Hogwarts right now, and I feel protected."

Snape's mouth opened but nothing came out. He flicked a glance around them and saw they were still completely alone. He returned his attention to the roots for a moment, trying to gather his scattered thoughts. Hermione followed his lead, and the silence stretched on.

An idea struck him, and Snape said, "Miss Granger, have you begun taking Apparition lessons yet?"

"No. Why?"

Snape sat back, his expression determined, and said, "Then I shall teach you. You *are* in danger whenever we leave school grounds, and being able to Disapparate is a handy skill to have."

Hermione's furrowed brow smoothed and she beamed at him again. "Oh, that would be wonderful, sir! Thank you so much!"

Snape averted his gaze and muttered, "Yes, well, it's only expedient. You may tell Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley, but no one else may know. If your would-be captors don't know you can Apparate, you'd have them at a disadvantage."

"Quite so."

They were silent again until they had gathered enough ingredients, at which point, Snape offered his arm to Hermione for Side-Along Apparition like usual. He was taken aback again when she slid her hand around his arm and hugged it, pressing her face against his bicep as she said, "Thank you, Professor, for all you've done and all you keep doing to save us and keep us safe."

Snape froze, his insides squirming again at the trusting affection in her touch and voice. She held him tight for a long moment, then released him and gripped his arm for their customary Apparition. Snape merely focused on their destination and Apparated there, looking down at her to say, "Next time, we shall practice Apparating as well. Fortunately, it is a Saturday, so I may collect you after lunch to give us time for lessons before harvesting."

Hermione followed him as he turned to walk toward the nearby public Floo. "I look forward to it, sir."

December 24, 1996

Two months had passed since Snape had begun teaching Hermione how to Apparate, and they were crunching through the wintry landscape in the wan sunlight, searching for the moss they had to harvest. Plumes of vapour streamed from their noses and mouths as they discussed the next stage of the brewing process. It took longer than Snape had estimated for them to find enough of the moss, especially since it was hidden beneath the banks of snow, and the stars were twinkling above them as they shivered in the rapidly dropping temperature.

Hermione tugged her scarf more securely around her head and throat, making sure her ears were covered against the bite of the wind. Snape was on his knees in the snow, scraping moss off the trunk of a tree after digging through the snow to find it. She noticed how his ears and nose were bright red, and shoved her hand into her pocket, trying to bolster her courage.

"That's the last one, isn't it, sir?"

Snape growled, "Yes. Thank the gods. It's bloody freezing out here."

At that fortuitous opening, Hermione pulled an object from her pocket and said, "Um... this is for you. Hopefully it will help."

Snape looked up to see her proffering a lumpy mass of black wool. Brow furrowed in confusion, he gingerly plucked it from her hand and shook it out to realize that it was a knitted cap with longer, scarf-like sides. He blinked in astonishment and stared at Hermione.

Hermione flashed a nervous smile and said, "Happy Christmas, Professor. It *is* Christmas Eve, after all."

Unsure what to make of her gift, he murmured, "Where did you get this?"

"I made it. I've been practicing, and Mrs. Weasley has shown me some tips and tricks. I noticed that you never seem to have a hood or a cap and your ears looks frightfully cold, Professor."

Snape snapped, "The last thing I want to wear is a *hood*, Miss Granger."

Hermione jumped at the implication. "Oh, of course not."

Feeling a prickle of shame at his harsh words, he pulled off a glove and stroked the wool, his brows rising in surprise as he snapped his gaze to Hermione.

Recovering herself, she said, "I managed to incorporate a Warming Charm into the knitting, so it will always feel warmer than just the wool itself."

Snape's insides squirmed at the thoughtfulness of her gesture and he found himself tugging the cap over his head, shrouding his stinging ears in comfortable heat and wrapping the ends around his throat. The warmth that stole over him wasn't only from the wool. Blinking rapidly, he licked his lips and said, "It worked quite well, Miss Granger. You have my thanks."

Hermione beamed at him again, flushing at his praise and at the way he was treating her more like a friend than just a student/assistant. "And you have mine, sir. Always."

She was taken aback by his fleeting grimace of pain, but it was gone so quickly that she wondered if perhaps she had imagined it. He returned to harvesting the last bit of moss, and Hermione made sure that the rest of their ingredients were safely stowed in the carrier.

Snape stood, handed the moss to Hermione to put away, and brushed the snow from his robes and trousers. "Ready, Miss Granger?"

Hermione nodded and gave him the carrier before gripping his arm for Side-Along Apparition. "Yes, sir."

Snape made a show of disengaging his arm from her grip and shook his head. "Not this time. You've been successful enough on your own that I think you should Apparate back under your own power."

Hermione's eyes went wide. She *had* successfully Apparated in their practice, but they had all been small jumps. Now they were miles and miles away from Hogsmeade, and Hermione was seized by nerves at the unexpected task.

Snape saw her fear and smirked, his voice low and mocking as he said, "What? A Gryffindor afraid to do something? Where's your vaunted bravery?"

Hermione frowned. "I'm just... do you really think I'm ready?"

Snape's smirk softened into a wry smile and he said, "Miss Granger, you are ready. Decidedly. Besides, do you really think I would risk you?"

Hermione sucked in a deep, steadying breath. "Very well, then, Professor. I trust you."

At that startling declaration, Snape felt his insides squirm again, but before he could say anything, Hermione had Disapparated. An icy spike of panic shot through him, and he immediately followed suit, holding his breath until he arrived to see that Hermione had reappeared too, whole and safe. She spun to look at him, her face alight with triumph.

"I did it!"

Snape rolled his eyes and drawled, "Of course you did. Now, come along."

Hermione couldn't stop grinning, but she dutifully followed Snape to the public Floo and through to his office. Once they stored the ingredients, Hermione said, "I appreciate your confidence, Professor. Happy Christmas."

She nodded and turned to leave, only to be stopped by Snape's tentative, "Happy Christmas to you as well, Miss Granger." She glanced back to see him gazing soberly at her, rubbing the wool of his knit cap between his fingers, then she hurried along the dungeon corridor to rejoin her friends for holiday festivities.

From Assistant to Friendly

Chapter 3 of 11

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July 20, 1997

The school year had finished, Harry was once again ensconced in Grimmauld Place, and the potion was at its final stage. In less than two weeks, Harry would turn 17, and everyone was starting to worry what the Dark Lord would do once Harry was of age.

Hermione sat at the workstation with Snape, watching him adding the ingredients they had just gathered. As soon as the delicate work was done, she said, "Professor, may I ask you a question?"

Still focused on the potion he was stirring, Snape said, "You mean another one? When has permission ever stopped you before?"

Hermione wrinkled her nose and huffed. "Is it working? Did we do everything right?"

Snape snorted and said, "Those were two questions, and yes, it looks right so far. Was that it?"

Hermione leant closer, trying to peer into the cauldron. "Actually, no. I was really wondering if you knew what You-Know-Who might do once Harry is 17."

Snape's expression settled into a blank mask and he meticulously removed the stirring rod, watched the potion drip off the end, then wrapped it in a clean towel before laying it on the tabletop. Finally, he lifted his gaze to meet Hermione's.

"I wish I knew exactly what he'll do, Miss Granger, but he has been courting ideas from Death Eaters for weeks now, so who knows what he will decide?"

Hermione bit her lower lip, brow furrowed in thought. Over the past year, she and Snape had developed a friendlier relationship, actually being able to engage in conversations, but anytime it came to his Death Eater spying, she never knew how much she could push before he retreated into his former cold aloofness.

"I had an idea, but I don't know whether it might work."

"Well, how would I know unless you tell me? Spit it out, girl!"

"All right... now that the potion is ready for Harry, what's to stop us from using it right away and going after You-Know-Who?"

Snape's expression darkened and he uttered a clipped, "No. That is not a good idea. At all."

"Why not?"

Leaning forward, he growled, "Mr. Potter hasn't even finished school. There is much he still needs to learn if he is to go against the Dark Lord. Besides, the longer we wait, the stronger you *all* will be when you join together via the potion. We must wait."

"But that's the thing...you managed to convince You-Know-Who to wait this past year, can't you convince him to wait another year?"

Lips curling, Snape snarled, "And how do you propose I do that, pray tell?"

Hermione took a deep breath and said, "Tell him about the potion."

Snape's brows shot up and his eyes widened in incredulity. "Are you *mad*?"

Hermione lunged forward and clamped a hand on his wrist in her earnestness. "No! Listen...if you tell him about the potion, then he'll want to use it too, right? But you said yourself first off that he couldn't use it effectively because he can't love. So, if you tell him about it *now*, then that would give us another school year at least for Harry and the rest of us to learn what we need to know while you make another potion for *him* to use!"

She paused, gasping for breath after reciting all that without stopping. Snape stared at her in wonder. She could see him making rapid calculations, his eyes unfocused and darting back and forth. After a long silence, he zeroed in on her again, and she twitched at the intensity of his gaze.

His voice was barely above a breathy rasp as he said, "Miss Granger, you are indeed the brightest witch of your age. Do you know what you've just done?" Hermione, owl-eyed, shook her head. "You may have just handed us the method we can use to not only defeat the Dark Lord but to also destroy his ranks of Death Eaters in one fell swoop!"

Hermione jerked back in astonishment. "I did?"

Snape shot to his feet, pacing and gesticulating wildly in his exultation. "The potion will not function for the Dark Lord, yes, and Mr. Potter will be able to destroy him once you and Mr. Weasley are joined with him through the potion. *But*, the Dark Lord will undoubtedly use his tendency toward excess and bind as many of his Death Eaters to him with the potion as he can, thinking to use their combined powers. And once he *finally* dies, all of those who were tied to him will be left as Squibs...practically obliterating the Death Eater movement all at once!" He paused, his head thrown back as he let loose a great bellow of delighted laughter, leaving Hermione completely gobsmacked. "You darling, *brilliant* girl...what would I do without you, Hermione?"

He finally looked at her again, seeing her face blotchy from going pale and blushing in quick succession. Her dazed look brought him back from his transports of triumphant joy, and he realized what he had just said out loud. His radiant smile wilted in horror, and he quickly averted his face, shaking his hair forward to hide his warming cheeks.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Granger. I quite forgot myself. I do hope I haven't offended you."

Hermione blinked rapidly, gathering the wits that had been scattered at the sight and sound of Snape laughing so uninhibitedly. "Certainly not, sir. I'm pleased to have been of use to the cause. Do you really think it could be so perfect?"

Snape cleared his throat. "With such a desirable outcome, it is my job to make sure that the Dark Lord believes and follows the plan. I will do everything in my power to persuade him."

Hermione dared to grip his arm again and murmured, "I have every faith in you, sir."

Snape's insides squirmed again, and he covered her hand with his, clasping it to pull her along with him. "Let's go. We need to tell the headmaster the news and have him call an Order meeting."

Hermione jogged to keep up with his long strides, trying not to acknowledge how much her pulse was racing at the feel of her hand captured in his grasp.

July 31, 1997

Harry's 17th birthday party was held in Grimmauld Place, and the dark house was filled with laughter and conversation. It wasn't until later that evening, long after the cake had been served, that Snape appeared, black eyes gleaming with accomplishment. He made a beeline to Hermione where she stood leaning against the wall, giggling as she watched Hagrid and Lupin attempting to sing a drunken duet.

Her smile fell away at the sight of Snape charging toward her, but returned in blazing force at his hissed, "It's done; it worked! The Dark Lord wants me to start the potion at the next full moon. We have another year to prepare!"

Fortunately, Snape's face was hidden between Hermione's bushy hair and the wall when she launched herself at him, hugging him, and no one could see the look of sheepish satisfaction that flashed over his face before he studiously crafted an expression of stern reprimand and pried himself from her embrace.

"Miss Granger! Are you drunk?"

Hermione laughed, utterly unaffected by his scolding tone. "Nothing of the sort, Professor! Unless you count being high on life...does that sort of euphoria count? Because I don't think I could be more thrilled at what you've done...again! It's the best present ever, and it's not even *my* birthday! And I'm not *even* going to apologize for hugging you, sir. You deserve much more than that."

Snape swallowed at her declaration, wishing he wasn't reacting to the adoration shining in her eyes. Coughing slightly, he rumbled, "Yes, well, let's just leave it at that, shall we? Where is the headmaster; I need to let him know what's happened."

Hermione continued beaming at him and said, "Last I saw him, he was in the library with Tonks and McGonagall. I'll go find Harry and Ron and tell them how amazing you are."

Snape snorted. "I doubt that will stand you in good stead, Miss Granger. You'd be much better served just telling them what happened, without making any assertions as to my character."

Tilting her head and smirking, she murmured, "Fine. I'll just keep how amazing you are all for myself. See you later, Professor."

Snape watched her bounce away, disappearing through the door and leaving a very flustered and flattered Potions Master in her wake.

From Friendly to Friends

Chapter 4 of 11

Now Complete

Written for nothingness101, as her SSHG Exchange BINGO prize. She requested: "A slightly fluffy Christmas romance which is a call back to the pureblood Snape of pre HBP. Basic story line about how Snape and Hermione get together, and I'd prefer a post war story. Thinking formal ball(s), formal courting, curtsies, formal address (Lord and Lady), maybe some family jewels (and maybe some Snape family to go with them). Please feature a frisky drunk Snape and lots and lots o' lemons."----I did my best!

AU post OotP, the tale of how Snape and Hermione helped defeat the Dark Lord, how their relationship developed, and how Snape Manor came into play.

Thanks to Gelsey for always being there to help me with this whole writing thing!

August 18, 1997

Two and a half weeks later, Hermione joined Snape again in the warm summer night. "Gee, Professor, we're right back where we started."

Snape quirked a half-smile at her impish grin. "On the contrary, my dear, we are much further along than where we were when we started."

Hermione clapped her hands and bounced in excitement. "You're right, as usual."

"What do you mean, 'as usual'? You should rather say 'as always!'" He glared at her, visibly affronted.

Hermione laughed. "No one is right all the time, Professor, so spare me the indignation."

Snape rolled his eyes and growled, "Such cheek..."

Hermione giggled again, but settled down to dig, letting a companionable silence fall between them.

September 16, 1997

The following month, Hermione was about to leave Snape's office after their latest foray, but stopped at Snape's soft, "Miss Granger."

Turning to gaze attentively up at him, she was surprised when he withdrew a long slim box from his desk drawer and presented it to her. It was wrapped and tied with a ribbon, and Hermione's brows drew closer in confusion. "Sir?"

Snape twitched the box, inclining his head toward it. "Here. Take it." Hermione grabbed the box, but just stared at it. "Go on, girl, open it!"

Blinking, Hermione unwrapped it and opened the box, unfolding tissue paper to find a new pair of high quality work gloves. Mystified, she said, "Thank you, of course, but... what are these for?"

Tossing his head, Snape bit out, "Working, Miss Granger. They *are* work gloves, after all."

Hermione heaved an exasperated sigh and said, "I know that, Professor; I meant why are you giving them to me as a present?"

Snape muttered, "I saw that your current pair have been getting too tattered with all the extra work we've been putting them through in the past year, and I thought you should have a new pair. And... it's your birthday coming up."

Hermione shook her head at the final rush of words. "Beg pardon?"

Drawing himself up ramrod straight, he said, "Miss Granger, is it or is it not your 18th birthday this Friday? Learn to accept a gift with some grace, for mercy's sake."

Comprehension dawned, and her puzzled expression changed to one of flattered delight. Smiling, she picked up the gloves and tried them on. "They fit beautifully, sir." Then, grinning at him, she darted forward and hugged him again. "Thank you."

Snape's cheeks warmed, and he struggled out of her arms, growling, "Miss Granger, that is not necessary!"

Hermione backed away and bit her lip, amusement and affection flashing from beneath her lowered lashes. "Oh, come now, Professor, learn how to accept a thank you with good grace!"

Snape pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes, glaring at her as she laughed and twirled away toward the door. "That's enough, you impudence. Off with you!"

"Good night, sir. And thank you again. I love them." She had tugged the gloves off and then clutched them to her heart, bowing in farewell before lifting them to drop a kiss on the dragon scales, eyes twinkling as she disappeared into the corridor.

Snape swallowed hard and sucked in a breath to steady the pounding of his heart.

December 14, 1997

Three months later, they were back outside in the wintry night, searching for ingredients, but this time, Snape was wearing the cap Hermione had knitted for him the previous year. Christmas was a week and a half away, and Hermione was wondering what to give Snape for a present this time. He was currently stationed up on a thick branch, trimming twigs from the tree and dropping them down to Hermione's waiting hands, which were enveloped in the gloves he had given her.

Racking her brain, she couldn't decide, so she ventured, "Professor?"

"Hmm?" Snape's gaze was focused on the wood he was sawing.

"I'll just be blunt... what would you like for Christmas?"

Snape's movement stopped, and he peered down at Hermione's pink face with a puzzled look. "Excuse me?"

Tossing her head, she repeated herself. "What would you like for Christmas? You know, as a gift?"

His face went blank. "I don't need anything..."

She cut him off, her tone scathing as she said, "I didn't ask what you *need*. I asked what you would *like*." She softened her voice at his warning glare and added, "It's not like I know what you have already or what you enjoy. But it's Christmas, and I want to be able to give my friends something they like!"

Snape shifted at her words, and he gripped the branch to keep from falling off. He stared at her and mumbled, "You already have."

Hermione's nose wrinkled in confusion, but she caught the twigs he tossed down to her. As she put them away, he dropped from the branch, sending up a cloud of powdery snow when he landed very close to her. She grimaced and said, "I gave you that cap *last* year."

Snape's voice was very low as he said, "That's not what I meant."

Hermione looked up and was surprised by how close they were. "Oh! Then... what did you mean?"

Cheeks reddening to join his chilled nose, Snape averted his eyes and faltered, "You've... already given me something I like. We're very close to ending this war. And I'm facing the possibility...no, *probability* that I will actually have a future beyond it." He locked eyes with her and continued, "And I like that I have a friend to look forward to being in that future with."

Hermione's pulse sped up, and she stared up at him, rapt. Her stomach was knotting and fluttering, and when he shoved a hand into his pocket and lifted a sprig of mistletoe he had trimmed from the tree branch, she gasped. She saw his jaw twitch as he clenched his teeth and then he was there, in her personal space, pressing a gentle kiss to her flushed cheek. Her eyelids drooped closed of their own accord, and she let out a soft sigh, her breath wafting over the side of his head.

After a beat, he straightened, eyes wide at his temerity, and he dropped the mistletoe at their feet. Voice rough, he said, "We're done here," and stepped back, Disapparating.

Hermione fell back a pace, stunned at the riotous feelings that left her heart pounding and at Snape's abrupt departure. One hand rose to touch the spot on her cheek that seemed to tingle with the sensation of his lips on her skin, and when she looked down to pick up the carrier, she saw the mistletoe he had dropped. She fell to her knees in the snow and snatched it up, pressing it to her chest as she heaved a calming breath. After a long moment, she pocketed the mistletoe and stood, cradling the carrier as she Disapparated.

As soon as she appeared with the carrier, Snape Flooed away, only willing to wait long enough to see that she arrived safely. Hermione followed quickly, but when she emerged in his office, she only heard his retreating footsteps echoing down the corridor.

December 25, 1997

Christmas morning, Snape found a small pile of presents on his dining table. One was from Hermione, and when he opened it, he couldn't help but smile fondly at the contents. There was a tin of loose-leaf tea, a teapot with two matching teacups and saucers, and a mesh tea infuser beside a package of chocolate biscuits. On top of the items, there was a note that read, "*Happy Christmas, Professor. The enclosed is for us to use in the not-too-distant future, when friends can share a cuppa or two in safety and comfort. Just know that if you eat the biscuits before then, I'll hold you responsible for replacing them for our date.*"

His gut squirmed at her choice of words.

"I'll be waiting for you when the war is over. I have no doubt you'll find me. By next Christmas, You-Know-Who will be gone, and you'll be lauded as the hero you truly are. Thank you again for all you've done.

With love,

Hermione"

January 12, 1998

Two and a half weeks later, Snape collected Hermione for the next full moon, and as they crunched through the snow on their quest, Snape said, "I...ah...see you received your Christmas gift."

Hermione patted her head and beamed at him. "Obviously. It's lovely, sir; thank you. Surely you didn't make it, so where did you find it?"

Snape glanced again at the knit cap with the longer scarf-sides like what she had made for him, only hers was a rich russet colour that picked up that shade in her hair. "I took mine to a craftsperson and asked for a copy in that yarn. Are the Warming Charms working correctly?"

Hermione brandished her gloved hands as well and declared, "I'm snug as can be! And it's a lovely warm colour too."

His voice was low as he said, "It suits you." He waited for a moment and added, "Thank you for the tea set."

Laughter colouring her voice, she said, "You've already eaten the biscuits, haven't you?"

Snape scowled, wishing his hair were free to tumble forward and hide his guilty flush. "None of your business."

Her hearty laughter left a visible cloud of vapour to trail behind her when she rushed to catch up with him as he stomped ahead.

From Friends to Colleagues

Chapter 5 of 11

Now Complete

Written for nothingness101, as her SSHG Exchange BINGO prize. She requested: "A slightly fluffy Christmas romance which is a call back to the pureblood Snape of pre HBP. Basic story line about how Snape and Hermione get together, and I'd prefer a post war story. Thinking formal ball(s), formal courting, curtseys, formal address (Lord and Lady), maybe some family jewels (and maybe some Snape family to go with them). Please feature a frisky drunk Snape and lots and lots o' lemons."----I did my best!

AU post OotP, the tale of how Snape and Hermione helped defeat the Dark Lord, how their relationship developed, and how Snape Manor came into play.

Thanks to Gelsey for always being there to help me with this whole writing thing!

July 9, 1998

Their 7th year was over, and the potion was almost complete. Hermione had received permission to stay at Hogwarts until the new potion was finished, and she enjoyed the peace and quiet that pervaded the castle now that it was nearly empty. She also enjoyed taking her meals in the vast Great Hall with the staff that remained, especially considering that the long House tables had been replaced with a much cosier pentagonal table, large enough to seat the dozen or so people who were still at Hogwarts over the summer.

Snape and Hermione regularly sat beside each other at one corner, preferring the way the angle helped them have conversations without having to turn to one side completely. They lingered over dinner the night of the penultimate full moon, and Hermione dared to broach a sensitive subject when the rest of the table was empty.

"So, Professor..."

He cut her off, saying, "Severus. You've finished school, Hermione. We're colleagues now."

Breath hitching at his voice saying her name for the first time in nearly a year, she ducked her head and stammered, "A-all right, Severus. I wanted to ask you what you expect will happen once the potion is ready for You-Know-Who."

Snape toyed with his fork, clinking it against his plate in an agitated staccato. "He has already said that he will gather his forces around him so that everyone can take a sip of the potion to augment his power. He expects me to be there too."

Hermione laid her hand over his, stopping the discordant noise and sliding the fork from his grasp. His hand twisted to clasp hers, gripping tight in an attempt to anchor himself away from his rising dread.

"Surely you can come up with something to convince him not to use you as well?" Hermione's worried eyes sought his and she squeezed his hand in comfort.

Snape cut a black glance at her and murmured, "There are some things that may be beyond even my skills at spinning tales."

Hermione had no answer, so she simply sat in the lengthening silence with him, her fingers laced with his, until the dishes disappeared from the table and they left to begin the night's harvest.

August 8, 1998

It was the last full moon to complete the second potion, and Snape and Hermione set out into the hot summer night on reluctant feet. There had been an Order meeting earlier that day, in which Snape had informed them that the Dark Lord was planning on attacking Hogwarts as soon as he had the potion. It had been decided that Harry should be moved to the school so he could be somewhat accessible but still have the protections the grounds afforded, drawing the attack. Now that the moment was almost upon them, everyone wanted to finally fight and end the waiting.

Snape was quiet during their trip, and Hermione refrained from disturbing him in his sombre reflections. When they were back at his workstation, starting the final steps, she sat to one side, thinking furiously, desperate to figure out how to keep Snape from being forced to drink the potion and lose his magic to the megalomaniac, even if it meant the Dark Lord would finally be defeated.

The last ingredients were added, and Snape was watching the liquid roiling in the cauldron, grimly satisfied that it was once again perfect. Hermione stepped up beside him and watched the potion too, whispering, "When you leave later this morning to take this to him, he won't let you go again, will he?"

Snape twitched his shoulders and murmured, "Not likely. He wants as much power as he can get. If I try to leave, he'd just kill me outright for betraying him."

Hermione shuddered and pressed her forehead against his shoulder, shutting her eyes against the vision he conjured with his stark words. "Then how can we get you out of there without him thinking you've betrayed him?"

Snape shot off his stool and paced away, his hands raking through his hair and gripping at the back of his neck. "I don't *know*, Hermione!" She watched the tension straining his body, miserable. "Once he drains us of our magic, we won't even be able to get here to see what happens! You'll all be here, fighting, and I'll be stuck waiting for his death to leave me to spend the rest of my existence as a bloody Squib!"

Hermione's gasp was loud in the charged silence following his outburst. At her hissed, "Severus!" Snape spun to face her. Her eyes were aglow with excitement, and she rasped, "I have an idea!"

Snape crossed to her instantly, gripping her arms and peering down into her radiant face. His voice was ragged with desperation as he said, "You darling, brilliant girl, *please* tell me what you've come up with this time. You've already saved the world, Hermione; I need you to save me too."

"Oh, Severus, it's so simple! Once he gets here, he'll *still* have to get past the enchantments to enter the grounds. *Why* struggle with that and leave himself exposed to attack from within if *you* can return first and bypass the protective spells for him? Guide him straight into the heart of the beast, if you will. By that time, Ron and I will have joined Harry via the potion, and he'll be ready to take him down. Don't you see? You're the *only* one who can give him that advantage!"

Snape's eyes widened with incredulous hope and he exhaled a shaky sigh of dazed relief before crushing her to him and descending upon her with a fervent kiss of gratitude.

Hermione's reaction was immediate. Her joy at giving him a way out sang through her, and she slid her hands into his hair, holding him fast as she enthusiastically deepened the kiss. After a long, breathless moment, they broke apart and she buried her face against his neck, vowing, "You still owe me tea and chocolate biscuits, Severus Snape, and I expect you to pay up."

Snape stroked her hair, his heart thundering at the miracle of her idea and the glory of her lips against his. "I can only hope that he will find your idea as beneficial as we do, so that I may be here to see that bastard fall. But, if I'm not here... if he doesn't buy into your plan... then you may have to find *me* once it's all over, as I won't be in any shape to Apparate anywhere looking for you."

Hermione backed out of his embrace and pinned him with a steely gaze. "If that happens, I will find you. And we will take comfort in sharing tea with a friend."

Snape nodded. After a pregnant pause, he cleared his throat and said, "It's almost done. Let's get the first potion so you may take it to Harry and Ron. The sooner you take it once I'm gone, the better, as I have no idea how quickly the Dark Lord may dose everyone and come here."

Hermione returned to their businesslike demeanour, following him to the storage cabinet where the first potion was secured. "We will. Is there anything else we need to do besides drink the potion and have Harry recite the incantation?"

"No. As long as you all love each other, that's all you need to do to transfer your powers to him." He handed her the bottle and returned to the cauldron.

"How long after the Death Eaters take the potion will You-Know-Who figure out that it didn't work?" Hermione watched him decanting the entire cauldronful.

Snape exhaled slowly. "I'm not sure. The potion will drain their powers, but when he tries to harness them for use, it's supposed to shatter all their magic...whatever that means. Depending on how quickly he does that, he may realize it right away."

"Then you must do everything you can to convince him to save the surge for when he's facing Harry. If he tries to use their powers to do anything else first, he'll know, and he may manage to get away."

"But he'd be defenceless..."

"Until he found someone else who would sacrifice something or someone to revive him again...no, we can't let that happen. Severus, please, try."

Snape swallowed hard and nodded. "I'll do my best. Go on now. I'm about to Floo to Hogsmeade and Apparate to his headquarters."

Hermione gripped the bottle until her knuckles were white. They crossed to the hearth and Snape tossed a pinch of powder in, turning the flames green.

Before he stepped into the fire, he turned to her and said, "Hermione, thank you for your genius, and please, be careful."

She nodded and whispered, "Always."

Once again, a pained grimace flashed across his expression, but this time it was followed by a determined, resolute look as he shook his head. Locking eyes with her, he murmured, "Indeed. Always," before whooshing out of sight.

"My Lord, the boy is in the castle. I saw him there before I brought you the potion. Your victory is at hand, and I must express my humble gratitude that you have allowed me to be your servant in this. The gates are open for your triumphant entrance, my Lord." Snape dropped to his knees and bowed his head as Voldemort stepped up to the gates of Hogwarts.

"You will be rewarded for your dedicated service, Severus. Be ready to take your place at my side."

Snape crawled forward and dropped his lips to the hem of Voldemort's robes. "Thank you, my Lord. You are most beneficent. It is ever my pleasure to serve you."

At that, Voldemort crossed the threshold into the Hogwarts grounds, leaving Snape on his hands and knees to stare after him. Snape counted to 100, making sure Voldemort wasn't going to turn back and request more from him, then he scuttled back behind the pillar with the winged boar and leant against the stone. Swallowing hard and taking a deep breath, he Disapparated.

He reappeared near the public Floo in Hogsmeade and raced into it, shouting, "Grimmauld Place!"

He emerged in the empty kitchen and pelted up the stairs to burst into the library. Ron stood braced before the fireplace, brandishing the poker in one hand, freckles standing out against his chalk-white face.

"You! What are you doing here?"

Snape glanced around the room and said, "I just let the Dark Lord onto the grounds. Everything should be over soon. Where is Hermione?"

Ron relaxed a trifle and said, "She's with her folks. We connected the Floo to the Grangers' place and she decided she was just as safe there. Said something about how if everything turned a cock-up, she'd at least be somewhere she knew how to be without magic."

"Of course, she would say something like that." Snape spun to leave again, but paused and said, "Thank you, Mr. Weasley. I'm certain that only one person will die today, and the only people left without magic will be Death Eaters."

Ron nodded, still looking a bit green with nerves, and said, "Thanks, Professor."

Snape raced back to the kitchen and Flooed to the Grangers' house, whirling onto their hearthrug to the accompaniment of startled cries.

"Severus!" Hermione's voice trembled with emotion and she jumped to her feet, throwing herself into his welcoming embrace. "Are you all right?"

Snape held her and stroked her hair. "I'm fine. Your plan was perfect and he bought into everything. As soon as I saw him into the grounds, I went to Grimmauld Place to find you. Mr. Weasley was there, but you weren't."

Hermione laughed in relief. "I was so nervous and worried, so I decided to come here for support." She pulled away and gestured to her parents sitting on the couch, then turned to gaze anxiously up at him. "Do you have any idea how much longer it will take?"

Snape smoothed his robes and said, "No. But I can't imagine it should take much longer. I could have stayed to watch the confrontation..."

She interrupted. "Yes, you *did* say you wanted to see the bastard fall."

Snape snorted and murmured, "Well, it turns out there are more important things I wanted to see." He paused for a moment, gazing soberly at her. "I had to make sure you were safe."

Hermione gripped his hand and smiled. "I am. Why don't you sit while we wait?"

They all sat, but no one bothered to talk, as everyone was too busy waiting with all their might to devote any energy to small talk.

It seemed like both barely a moment and ages later when more people spun out onto the hearthrug in a cloud of soot. Snape shot to his feet, wand out, shoving Hermione behind him, but let his hand drop at the sight of Ron and Harry, immediately followed by Dumbledore and Kingsley.

Harry croaked, "Hermione!" and fell into her arms. Ron stood with them, patting their backs.

Snape snapped his gaze to the other men and said, "Is it over?"

They both nodded. Dumbledore said, "Voldemort is no more."

Kingsley rumbled, "If your potion worked as it was supposed to, there should be scores of powerless Death Eaters to round up. Can you take us to their headquarters?"

Snape nodded sharply, then turned to see the three young people wrapped around each other. Even though he knew they had to be as physically close as possible for Harry to release their magic back to them, his stomach squirmed at the sight of Hermione so intimately tied to her best friends.

He apparently stared too long, because Kingsley coughed and drawled, "Today, Severus?"

Snape blinked and straightened, sucking in a deep breath. "Of course. I assume the rest of the Order and Aurors are at Hogwarts, awaiting a destination?"

Kingsley nodded and said, "Indeed. If we Floo back now, we can tell them where we're going and arrive en masse. Was it Secret-Kept?"

Snape curled his lip in a sardonic smile. "Not anymore. Let's go."

He flicked one last glance at the entwined trio before leading Dumbledore and Kingsley through the Floo.

Late that night, Snape was in his quarters, coming down from the tension that had ruled his life for so long. Sitting in his armchair in front of the fire, he sipped a tumbler of Firewhisky and tried to let his mind just drift.

He nearly spilt his drink, jerking to attention and startled by Hermione's face appearing in the suddenly-green flames.

"Hermione?" He sat forward, setting his glass on the side table. "What's wrong?"

Her radiant smile was only slightly distorted by the Floo. "Nothing! I just wanted to let you know that the potion worked perfectly, as did the process to give us back our magic. Ron and I are perfectly fine...all thanks to you."

Snape wilted in relief but grimaced. "It wasn't just my doing. You had quite a few brilliant ideas yourself. Without you, things could have been so much worse." He paused, then murmured, "I'm glad you're all right."

She laughed. "We're going to have a party at Hogwarts tomorrow...high noon...to celebrate the end of the war. Dumbledore is inviting the press and the public. Your domain is about to be invaded, Severus."

Snape scowled. "He never said anything to me."

"Well, we only just decided it here within the last hour. Everyone came back to Grimmauld Place after dealing with all the new Squibs." She inclined her head in a gesture of acknowledgement. "I wouldn't be surprised if the entirety of the wizarding world managed to show up on the grounds at some point tomorrow."

"Spare me." He shuddered and said, "I suppose I'll have to dodge the likes of that Skeeter woman."

Hermione's smirk was malicious. "Don't worry, Severus, I'll protect *you* for once. I've got her under my thumb."

Cocking an eyebrow at her, he drawled, "Really? Do tell."

She chuckled and said, "I'll tell you all about it some day, but I'm fair knackered and I need to get some rest before the party tomorrow. I'm kipping here for the night, then

I'll come get my stuff from Hogwarts and move it into my new flat. I daresay you could use some sleep too. You look rather strung out."

Shrugging, he said, "It'll all take a while to settle in...become real. It feels like this is all a dream."

Smiling fondly, she coaxed, "Go on, now, Severus. Get some sleep. I promise you it's not a dream, and when you wake up tomorrow, you'll see for yourself."

Snape's lips spread in a wry half-smile. "Fine. I'll hold you to that promise *and* to you keeping Skeeter away from me."

"No worries. I won't let you out of my sight. Good night, Severus."

"Good night." Her face disappeared, and the flames returned to their normal colours. Snape tossed back the rest of his drink, slammed the tumbler on the table, and heaved to his feet. He passed a hand over his face and through his hair as he dragged to his bedroom door, flicking a muttered, "Nox" over his shoulder and leaving the room shrouded in darkness.

From Colleagues to Confidants

Chapter 6 of 11

Now Complete

Written for nothingness101, as her SSHG Exchange BINGO prize. She requested: "A slightly fluffy Christmas romance which is a call back to the pureblood Snape of pre HBP. Basic story line about how Snape and Hermione get together, and I'd prefer a post war story. Thinking formal ball(s), formal courting, curtsies, formal address (Lord and Lady), maybe some family jewels (and maybe some Snape family to go with them). Please feature a frisky drunk Snape and lots and lots o' lemons."----I did my best!

AU post OotP, the tale of how Snape and Hermione helped defeat the Dark Lord, how their relationship developed, and how Snape Manor came into play.

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August 10, 1998

Snape watched the teeming mass of people on Hogwarts' lawn, loath to leave the castle to join them for the celebration. He stood there, frowning, until he felt a hand slip into the crook of his elbow, and he turned his head to see Hermione smiling up at him.

"Ready?" She jerked her chin at the window.

Snape heaved a reluctant sigh but growled, "If I have to."

Hermione swatted his shoulder and said, "Severus Snape! You are a hero and you will go down there and accept the accolades you so richly deserve, do you hear me?"

Grimacing and making a show of plugging the ear closest to her, he muttered, "Loud and clear."

She squawked in indignation and glared at him, dragging him along. "Ha ha, very funny. Come on, smart-arse."

The day was a whirlwind of cheers and raucous laughter, bids for pictures and interviews, and hearty thanks and congratulations. Snape was overwhelmed and clung to Hermione in desperation, vehemently grateful for her tact and diplomacy in handling the non-stop throng of well-wishers.

Several hours later, they were sitting at one of a hundred small tables, taking a much-needed dinner break. Between Snape's infamous glare and Hermione's more gracious entreaties for some peace, they remained relatively unbothered. However, they were savouring the rich chocolate cake and vanilla ice cream, a relief in the heat of the August evening, when an older man approached and dropped into an empty chair beside them.

Snape's hackles instantly raised, and Hermione laid a repressive hand on his arm. "May we help you with something?"

The man surveyed Snape with a keen look and nodded. "You may not, dear girl, but Severus here may."

Eyes narrowed, Snape said, "What do you mean?"

The man proffered his hand and said, "I've been in hiding for years, completely secure under the Fidelius Charm. But now it's safe to come out again, thanks to you. The name is Lazarus. Lazarus Snape. And you're my great-nephew. I'd like to welcome you home to Snape Manor."

Hermione gasped beside him, eyes wide and mouth open. Her fingers spasmed, gripping his arm tighter.

Snape stared blankly at the older man, utterly gobsmacked. After a long beat of charged silence, he managed to rasp, "*Snape Manor?*"

Lazarus let loose a great belly laugh and said, "Quite so, dear boy. Back when You-Know-Who first started his rise to power, I put it under the Fidelius Charm. I wanted people to forget that it...and I, frankly...existed. I had seen the direction it was all going, and since the Snape line had traditionally been Slytherins, I feared being sucked into the whole Death Eater bollocks."

Snape looked dazed, but he finally said, "*Snape Manor?* How could there be a Snape Manor? My father was a Muggle."

Lazarus grinned and winked. "Not exactly. My brother, Titus had a son, Darius, who was a Squib. He, too, had a son, Tobias, your father, who was also a Squib. Didn't help that Titus and Darius married Muggles, I'm sure. Fortunately, Tobias married that Prince girl, and you were the result. Finally brought the magic back out in the Snape line, you did. It's a shame I never married. You're my only living wizard relative, Severus, and I want you to come home."

Snape was speechless, but he was also eyeing the older man with undisguised suspicion. Hermione stepped into the lengthening silence and said, "Why should we believe you?"

Lazarus chuckled and said, laying one finger alongside his nose, "I know all about you, Severus. Made it my business to keep up with your exploits, as it were. I figured you were on the right side, ever since the first trial where Dumbledore vouched for you. So I know that you know Legilimency, and you can verify that I'm telling you the truth right now if you really want to. Then again, I'm sure a Potions Master of your calibre would have access to Veritaserum as well. Whichever you think would be most effective, I'm happy to oblige you. Considering what you've done to help rid our world of You-Know-Who, I'm proud to come out of hiding and claim you as family, and you deserve access to all the luxuries Snape Manor has to offer its scion."

Snape's brow smoothed and he blinked rapidly, his tense posture relaxing as he was overwhelmed by the man's offers. Hermione watched his reaction and leant closer to whisper, "Well, which would you prefer? Shall I go fetch the Veritaserum for you?"

Snape shook his head, coming back to himself, and murmured, "No. I'll just take a peek on my own." Turning the full force of his intimidating glare on Lazarus, he said, "You consent to Legilimency?" Lazarus nodded and Snape growled, "*Legilimens*."

It only took a moment for Snape to rock back in his seat, eyes wide. Hermione squeezed his arm and he turned to her, stunned. His voice was barely a whisper as he said, "He's telling the truth. I saw Snape Manor."

Lazarus beamed. "It's all there for you, dear boy. Would you like to come home tonight?"

Hermione frowned and bit her lip, flicking a glance at Snape. He stared at the table for a moment, considering. Eventually, he said, "Not tonight. I'll be in touch. This is a lot to absorb."

Lazarus nodded and said, "Of course it is...thinking you're alone in the world and then finding out not only are you not alone, but you're heir to a rather significant fortune, which I have already granted you access to at Gringotts...it's enough to flummox anyone. I'll let you think about it, but I look forward to hearing from you, Severus." He shoved to his feet and slid a calling card across the table to lodge under Snape's fingers. "It was a pleasure meeting you both. Good night."

They stared after his retreating form, digesting the incredible news that had just dropped on them.

Before they could fully internalize it or talk about it, Dumbledore dropped into a chair at their table and said, "I didn't want to interrupt your conversation, but now that you're free, you need to know that the Ministry has decided that there will be an official gala event to celebrate the end of the war, and the ceremony will include distributing awards to all of us who have contributed to the victory. It's this Saturday, and...while this is still speculation, I'm fairly certain it's accurate...not only will there be Order of Merlin, First Class awards, there will be monetary compensation for 'hazardous duty.' It will be at the Ministry ballroom, and we will all be expected to be there in our finest attire. That leaves four days to make sure you have appropriate dress robes, you two. Keep that in mind! Now, I have to go spread the news. Enjoy the rest of the evening!"

He shot to his feet and hurried to another knot of Order members near the refreshments. Hermione and Snape exchanged dazed looks. After a beat, Snape planted his elbows on the table and dropped his head into his hands, scrubbing his face and raking his fingers through his hair. Hands clamped on the back of his neck, he heaved a deep sigh and rasped, "Did all of that really just happen?"

Hermione rubbed his back in reassurance and said, "It really did. Don't lose Lazarus' card. That's so exciting for you, Severus!"

He twisted to slant a sardonic glance at her and said, "I can't believe I may not have to go back to Spinner's End again if I don't want to." Then, he inhaled and sat up, letting his hands fall to the tabletop. "As for this Ministry event, I'm not particularly looking forward to that either."

Hermione snorted softly. "Don't you want your Order of Merlin?" He grimaced at her and she laughed. "Well, I think it'll be nice to get the recognition you deserve. Dumbledore had a point about the attire though. I *will* need to go shopping before Saturday!"

Snape groaned and closed his eyes. "Bloody hell..."

"What? I haven't had dress robes since fourth year, and I'm certainly not about to turn up at a Ministry event dressed like I was for the Yule Ball!"

Snape rolled his eyes at her, sighing, and said absently, "Why not? You looked smashing that night, if I remember correctly...you twirling around on Viktor's arm."

Hermione jerked in surprise, suddenly acutely aware that she was blushing and still had her hand on his back. "Uh... well... thanks." Clearing her throat, she gingerly moved her hand to the tabletop and said, "So, do you have dress robes?"

Snape snorted. "Basic enough. I've not been one to court *fashion*."

He twisted the word like it was an insult and Hermione chuckled, regaining her equilibrium. "Well now, a war hero, not to mention heir to the Snape family fortune, should definitely be dressed appropriately. It's about time you got to splurge on the finer things in life, Severus. Would you like to join me for shopping? I promise I won't let the shopkeepers manhandle you too much."

He turned to meet her teasing grin with a narrow-eyed smirk. "Fine. As long as you match me in flagrant extravagance."

Hermione laughed and nodded, offering her hand to shake. "Deal."

Snape took her hand and held it tight, not releasing her when she made to pull away. Snape's gaze had her pinned, and she sucked in a breath as he murmured, "I know from the Yule Ball that you can handle the dance floor. Hermione, would you be so kind as to protect me at the Gala as well by being my dance partner? I promise you that I will not tread on your toes."

That blush was creeping up again to heat her face, and Hermione swallowed, trying hard to maintain nonchalance as she said, "I doubt you'll need ~~pro~~tection, Severus, but of course, I'll dance with you. What are friends for?"

Snape's lips spread in a genuine smile and he lifted her captive hand to drop a gentle kiss on her knuckles. Eyes glinting with a mixture of mischief and appreciation, he said, "Then I shall be in your debt, my lady."

Hermione offered a shaky smile and tugged her hand free, doing her best to ignore his warmth on her fingers and the quivery tingle that had raced from where he had kissed her straight to her core. Darting a glance around to see if anyone had noticed their byplay, she saw no one looking at them and gave herself a little shake. "So, uh, what time should we meet, and which shop do you want to start with?"

Snape's brow furrowed and he said, "I've never been to Twilfitt and Tattings, but I've heard Narcissa go on about it before. She claims that it's much more upscale than Madam Malkin's. Have you ever been?"

"No. It's always been Madam Malkin's or Gladrags for me. We can start there if you want. Tomorrow?"

"As you like. May as well get it out of the way."

"All right. How about 10:00? Plenty of time to have a lie-in and breakfast first. Just promise me one thing, Severus..."

He snapped around to stare at her, wary. "What's that?"

"That you won't buy anything *black*."

Her grin was both impish and legitimately pleading, and Snape tossed his head, huffing. "*Fine*. But I will *not* even try anything even remotely as garish as that Lockhart idiot."

Hermione burst out laughing at the ridiculous images that incited, and she decided to play along with his earlier words. "Oh, my lord is *much* more dignified than that. I wouldn't dream of besmirching your stature in such a manner. Besides, I have a reputation to uphold as well, and I wouldn't dare be seen with a dandy like him. I shall be dancing with the illustrious Severus Snape, you know."

Snape's lids drooped and one corner of his mouth quirked up. Eyeing her through his lashes, he purred, "Indeed, then he is a lucky man, my lady." Rising, he picked up Lazarus's card, eyeing it thoughtfully before turning to offer his arm to Hermione and saying, "May I have the privilege of escorting you home?"

Hermione thrilled to the courtly gesture and slipped her hand through his elbow, standing beside him. "I would be honoured, noble sir."

She ducked her head and held back a giggle, but grinned in response when she looked up to see Snape smiling at her in fond amusement.

Hermione added, "*And* you can help me unpack in my new flat!" Snape nodded amiably, and they trekked back to the castle in the waning summer sunlight, enjoying a companionable silence.

The next morning, they found themselves nearly overwhelmed by the zealous staff at Twilfitt and Tattings, until Snape gathered his former persona about him like raiment and sternly ordered the attendants to cease their fluttering and leave them be. "Isn't it your job to find us appropriate robes? Well then, go on!"

In the lull that followed them scattering like roaches, Hermione and Snape exchanged harried looks and took steadying breaths. "Severus, would you be willing to help me decide what to buy? Having an opinion from someone I trust would be so much more useful than listening to the people who make their money off sales."

Snape inclined his head solemnly. "Of course. Would you be so kind as to do the same for me? As you can well imagine, I am rather out of my element."

Hermione smiled. "I'd love to. But you had better get used to this now, what with your inheritance and all."

Snape frowned. He barely had time to mutter, "We'll see..." before an attendant surged up to him, laden with dress robes in a multitude of styles and colours.

Hermione giggled at the way the attendant flinched when Snape sneered at the pastels and bright, primary colours. Hoping to stave off Snape losing what remained of his temper, she intervened with a gentle, "I should think that darker hues would better suit, perhaps some royal tones."

The attendant bobbed in agreement and dashed away again, leaving Snape to raise one eyebrow at her and drawl, "Royal tones?"

Affecting a demure curtsy, she lilted, "Certainly, my lord. The attire of such a noble man as you must fit in with the opulence of Snape Manor."

Snape rolled his eyes even as his lips quirked in a suppressed smile. "Still on about that, are you? Very well then, my lady. Ever your servant, I shall not rest until my attire meets with your approval, and yours dazzles enough to rival your own radiance."

Hermione blinked, taken aback by his language and how easily he slipped into the courtly role again. She was saved from having to reply by the attendant returning with a much more appropriate selection for Snape.

Snape slanted one last long-suffering glance at Hermione as he followed the attendant to the gentlemen's fitting rooms. While he was inside, Hermione's attendants arrived, racks of gowns and robes floating alongside them. She was perusing the selection, occasionally marking an item as one to take to her fitting room, and waiting for Snape to come out.

After several minutes, she paused in her task and called, "Severus, aren't you supposed to be showing me what you're trying so I can give you my opinion?"

Snape's voice rumbled from behind the door. "As soon as I find something that I would be willing to purchase, I'll show you as well."

Hermione heaved an exasperated sigh. "I know it's not a matter of fit...we're *wizards*. You're just not giving things a chance, are you?"

The silence that met her accusation gave her her answer, and she rolled her eyes. Finally, Snape muttered, "Are you *sure* I can't get anything black?"

At that, Hermione flung the gown she was holding back onto the rack and stormed over to the fitting rooms. "Severus Snape, make sure you're decent and step out here *right now*."

Snape's aggrieved sigh was loud in the stunned silence of the shop, the attendants staring at Hermione in awe. After a few moments of rustling, the door opened and Snape stepped out.

Hermione actually fell back a step, gobsmacked. Her breath caught in her throat and her heart seemed to stutter in her chest.

Snape straightened his robes, narrowed eyes flicking around at the stares, the mulish set of his jaw almost daring anyone to say anything.

Hermione found her voice, but it trembled as she said, "Good gods, Severus..."

Chin lifting as he steeled himself for mockery, he growled, "It's ridiculous, isn't it?"

The smattering of affronted gasps gave him pause, but it was Hermione's outraged squawk that drew his attention. "Of course not! Do you honestly not see how striking you are in that?"

Snape's prickly manner faltered, and he looked in the mirror. "Really?"

Hermione stepped closer and ran an admiring hand down his midnight blue lapel. "I had no idea how much difference a little colour could make." Eyes sparkling, she lifted a hand to smooth a lock of his hair, making him start at the shiver that ran over him, leaving goose flesh in its wake. "The shade brings out the blue-black highlights in your hair. And the silver threading and decorations makes your skin glow. Really, Severus, you're stunning!"

Snape's skin was glowing, all right, but it was from the flush washing over him in an uncomfortably hot flash. Hermione guided him to step closer to the mirror and stood behind him, raking her fingers through his hair to gather it at the nape of his neck. Heated sparks sizzled through him, leaving him dizzy.

"Look! If you tie your hair back like this...that's it. I had no idea. You are rather distractingly handsome, my lord." The last statement was for his ears only, as she stretched up to murmur in his ear, holding his gaze in the mirror.

He whispered, "Aren't you exaggerating..."

Hermione cut him off with a vehement shake of the head. "Not a bit of it. You wanted my opinion; you've got it. I would be honoured to be seen on the dance floor with you, Severus."

Snape swallowed. "Very well then. Why don't I change back and you can find something for yourself."

Hermione's appreciative gaze raked him from head to toe, and she said, "Oh, won't you keep it on until I find something? That way we can see how we look together."

Snape's gut squirmed when she said, "together." He cleared his throat and nodded. "Fine. Go on then. I'll wait."

Hermione flashed him a dazzling smile and went back to the rack, quickly pulling a few more to send into the ladies' fitting room. Snape eyed himself in the mirror again, copying Hermione's actions with his hair.

His attendant darted forward and said, "We have ribbons to match all of our fabric, sir. If you would like one to tie your hair back, I'd be happy to fetch it for you."

Snape cast a pensive glance toward where Hermione had disappeared, remembering the frankly hungry look in her eyes as she had whispered in his ear, and said, "Please do."

The attendant brought him a chair as well, and Snape sat, waiting for Hermione to determine what she would buy. Every few minutes, she would emerge from the fitting room, clad in concoctions of silk, lace, tulle, and velvet in every shade of the rainbow, peppered with spangles, crystals, beads, and jewels.

Snape was glad he was sitting down, as his knees got progressively weaker every time she paraded out in figure-hugging gowns that bared an infinitely varied amount of smooth skin. Hermione twirled and posed, beaming at Snape as she enjoyed the gorgeous creations. She had worked her way through the pastels and primary colours and was finally turning to the same royal tones that had been offered to Snape.

Hermione stepped out of the fitting room again, and Snape shot to his feet; the urge to rush over and pull her into his embrace was intense.

The gown's bodice was midnight blue velvet, rising as a halter above the deep v-neck, casting delicious shadows on her exposed cleavage, and continuing up to create a stiff collar that curved outward just below her earlobes. An inverted vee from the bottom of the neckline sloping down over her hips began the shimmering drape of silk that ended with a hint of a train at her heels. As she spun, he saw the plunging open back, hugging her curves and revealing the line of her spine. Glittering strings of crystals and silver beads hung from the back of the collar to fan out and join the edge of the bodice. More crystals and silver beads lined the border between the fitted velvet and the flowing silk, girding her torso and culminating in a starburst at the front of the bodice.

Hermione stepped in front of the mirror and lifted her riotous curls, twisting them up in a messy chignon, emphasizing the slim column of her neck framed by the rigid collar. The effect was dramatic and the smouldering desire in Snape's gut flared, making him want to trail kisses down her naked back.

Snape stepped up behind her, his wide eyes never leaving her reflection, and Hermione met his gaze with a delighted smile. "Oh, look! Our colours go together." Snape's tongue flicked out to wet his lips and she froze at the frisson of attraction that swept over her. Letting her hair fall and dropping her hands to her sides, she said in a low voice, "What do you think, Severus?"

He cleared his throat and swallowed hard, his hands fluttering upward, wanting to touch her. Seizing on the idea, he inclined his head in a bow and offered his arm, murmuring, "My lady, if it would please you that I keep these robes, say the word and I shall do so immediately. And if you would be willing to grace my presence in such an exquisite gown, I would be in your debt, as your beauty would encompass me and make my appearance bearable." He deftly lifted her hand to slip it into the crook of his elbow. "It would be an honour to escort you to the Gala, my lady."

Hermione's pulse sped up, and a becoming flush stained her cheeks. "That would please me, indeed, my lord."

They locked eyes in the mirror, until Hermione squeezed his arm and blinked. Snape backed away, grateful that the robes hid how tight his trousers were.

Whirling, Hermione said, "I need to find accessories to complete the look. Why don't you go buy that handsome outfit, and I'll join you once I've found my accessories?"

Snape nodded, and Hermione disappeared into the fitting room again. He changed back into his regular clothes and gathered the robes and matching ribbon to take to the register. When he reached the counter, he saw Hermione following her attendant to a section further away, and he turned his attention to the clerk. "I would like to purchase these."

"Certainly, sir."

When the clerk said the total amount, Snape froze, astonished at how much it cost. He had always been frugal, and had never spent so much on clothing before in his life. "Charge it to my Gringotts account."

The clerk nodded pleasantly, and Snape leant against the counter, looking for Hermione. A few moments later, she appeared, a basket on her arm and the gown floating along behind her.

"Did you find what you wanted?"

She beamed. "I even found things I didn't know I wanted until I saw them!" Her laughter made him quirk a faint smile, and she continued, "I can't wait to see what everyone else will be wearing too!"

The clerk handed Snape his new robes, wrapped securely, and Hermione set her basket on the counter. "Will this be all, Miss?"

"Yes, I should think so."

Snape watched in bemusement as the clerk rang up not only the sumptuous gown, but shoes, gloves, hair accessories, jewellery, and even some delicate stockings and lingerie...a jolt of shocked arousal heated his face and he jerked his gaze elsewhere, trying in vain to not picture Hermione in nothing but the lingerie and stockings.

When the clerk announced her total, Snape's mouth opened in amazement. "That's nearly twice what mine was!"

Hermione flashed him a lopsided grin and retorted, "Well, you did say I had to match you in flagrant extravagance. You don't have to match me, however."

Snape just stared, almost appalled at the exorbitant costs of their finery. "Narcissa had a point, I guess."

Hermione snorted and signed the charge slip for her Gringotts account. "I'm just glad we're expecting that 'hazardous duty' pay..." The clerk wrapped up her purchase and handed it to her, and Hermione spun to smile up at Snape. "I guess we're done! I honestly had no idea it would be this easy. Then again, if money is no object, I daresay one finds one's path much easier." She slipped her hand around his elbow and led him out into the summer sunshine. Once they were out of earshot, she murmured, "I'm so glad your path will finally be easier for you, Severus, now that you've got the manor and your inheritance."

Snape paused, turning to gaze solemnly at her. "I don't know what to expect, really. It's so alien. I mean, I've been around Lucius and Narcissa often enough to have an idea, but when it's supposed to be yours, it's different! Will you come with me whenever I go? I daresay I could use the moral support."

Hermione's lips spread in a fond smile, and she wrapped both hands around his arm, leaning closer. "I am flattered and delighted to accept your invitation, my lord."

Snape's anxiety ebbed at the conspiratorial lilt of her voice as she invoked their shared tease. He purred, "My lady is gracious, indeed," before lifting her hand to drop a gentle kiss to her knuckles again.

Hermione blushed and averted her eyes, and they walked on, arm in arm, both anticipating the Gala, but for markedly different reasons.

Saturday afternoon, Hermione indulged in pampering unlike any she had allowed before. After spending a deliciously long time in a hot bath spiked with essential oils, she: anointed her skin with scented lotion; successfully attempted a mani/pedi with pewter nail varnish...even though her fingernails would be hidden by the long gloves; wrestled and tamed her hair into an updo, twisting it in a chignon with crystal and jewel hairpins but letting the curls spill over in a cascade from the crown of her head; bedecked her ears and throat with matching jewellery; and used make-up to subtly enhance her eyes and lips.

Then she was left with getting dressed, and she bit her lip in a mischievous grin as she slipped on the midnight blue satin suspender belt and smoky stockings, followed by a matching lace thong. The daringly low plunge of both the front and back of the dress negated the use of a bra, but the structure of the velvet bodice was sturdy enough that Hermione felt comfortable. She beamed at her reflection as she shimmed into the dress, rolling her shoulders to settle the glittering strands spanning her back. Finally, she buckled the sleek heels and stood, pulling on the above-the-elbow gloves and smoothing the drape of the silk over her hips. The height from her heels left the slight train of her gown barely hovering above the floor, and Hermione laughed aloud. "Severus won't tower over me quite so much now!"

The Gala opened at 7:00, providing dinner as well as entertainment and ceremony. Hermione had agreed to meet Snape at Hogwarts, as he hadn't yet moved into either Spinner's End or Snape Manor. There was still almost half an hour before the Gala opened, but Hermione couldn't wait any longer. She cast a charm to protect herself from the soot, stepped into the green flames in the hearth of her tiny sitting room, and Flooed to Snape's quarters.

Spinning out onto the hearth, she didn't see him anywhere, so she called, "Severus, I'm here! Are you ready?"

A muffled cry of surprise came from the vicinity of his bedroom, and he yelled, "I'll be right out!"

"All right!"

A few moments later, Snape emerged from his bedroom, tugging on his cuffs, his expression anxious until he saw Hermione, at which point he stopped dead in his tracks and gaped at her, eyes going wide in amazement.

Hermione beamed and bobbed a curtsy, "Do I meet with your satisfaction, my lord?"

Snape sucked in a ragged breath and shot across the room to join her, eyes dark with attraction. Lifting her hand, he murmured, "My lady is resplendent beyond description," before pressing a kiss to her knuckles again, but this time, it wasn't fleeting. His lips caressed her hand, his breath ghosting warm through the fabric of her glove as his gaze held hers.

A wave of heat crashed over her, pausing to roil her gut and weaken her knees. She gasped, trying to keep her senses, and breathed, "My lord is too kind."

Snape lifted his head and released her hand, his lips spreading in a languorous smile. "I can see that I will be hard pressed to keep your company for my dance card tonight, Hermione."

Hermione blushed and voiced a non-committal noise. "I said I'd dance with you, Severus; you needn't worry."

Snape deliberately closed his eyes and fell back a step, swallowing back his roaring desire for the woman before him. "I'm not worried about that...I believed you when you said that's what friends are for. However, I refuse to monopolize your time when you can finally have a chance to frolic and enjoy yourself. I'm sure there will be scores of young men there tonight who would jump at the chance to dance with you."

A faint frown quirked her brow but disappeared in a flash. "I'm sure Harry and Ron will dance with me, for friendship's sake, but they'll no doubt be besieged by others wanting their attention."

Snape turned away, his expression closed again. "I daresay that would look better than being ostracized..."

"What do you mean? Who do you think will be ostracized?"

He cut an aggrieved glare at her. "Really, Hermione? You're not stupid."

She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes dangerously. "Oh, honestly! If you're implying that *you'll* be ostracized, then you *are* stupid!"

One brow rose and he faced her, his gaze frosty. "Ever the optimist! Is that a Gryffindor trait or just yours?"

Hermione heaved a sigh and rolled her eyes. Voice weary, she said, "Oh, for... *Enough* with the House politics! Fine. If you're *so* worried about having a miserable time tonight, why don't you do something about it, O Master of Potions?"

Grimacing in confusion, Snape snapped, "Like what?"

Brows rising in lofty challenge, she retorted, "Oh, I don't know; how about a little liquid courage? Surely you have *something* that can ease your mind and boost your mood." He stared at her, taken aback. Suddenly desperate that he actually have a good time for once, she sweetened the deal. "Pick something, and I'll take it too. Isn't it time we finally get to enjoy ourselves?"

Her wistful expression sparked a warmth in Snape's chest. Duly considering, he strode through the room to the far door, entering his potions lab. After a few minutes of silence, he returned with a dusty bottle. "Elixir to Induce Euphoria. I already added the peppermint, to counteract any side-effects." He paused, staring soberly at her. "Were you serious?"

Hermione crossed to him and wrapped her hand around his and the bottle. "Yes. It isn't habit-forming, and it doesn't react poorly to alcohol, so why not? We *deserve* some fun, Severus."

He met her bold gaze, nodded slowly, and opened the bottle. Never breaking eye contact, he tossed back a dose, then another...enough to last him well into the night. Wiping his lips with the back of his hand, he proffered the bottle to her.

Hermione lifted her chin and copied his actions, grinning cheekily at him as she handed the bottle back. "There. Now we're *bound* to have fun! And look, it's nearly time. Are you ready to go, my lord?"

Feeling the euphoria starting to curl through his veins, Snape grinned back, bowed, and said, "Indeed, my lady."

As one, they cast the charm to protect themselves from soot and Flooed to the Ministry, Hermione taking his arm once they arrived. Exchanging saucy looks, they chuckled as they made their way to the Ballroom.

From Confidants to Competitors

Chapter 7 of 11

Now Complete

Written for nothingness101, as her SSHG Exchange BINGO prize. She requested: "A slightly fluffy Christmas romance which is a call back to the pureblood Snape of pre HBP. Basic story line about how Snape and Hermione get together, and I'd prefer a post war story. Thinking formal ball(s), formal courting, curtsies, formal address (Lord and Lady), maybe some family jewels (and maybe some Snape family to go with them). Please feature a frisky drunk Snape and lots and lots o' lemons."----I did my best!

AU post OotP, the tale of how Snape and Hermione helped defeat the Dark Lord, how their relationship developed, and how Snape Manor came into play.

Thanks to Gelsey for always being there to help me with this whole writing thing!

The evening passed like a bright, gaudily coloured blur. Dinner preceded the ceremony to give awards and honour those who contributed to the great victory. Afterward, the party began, and libations of both wizarding and Muggle variety flowed in copious amounts, easing the interactions on and around the dance floor.

Hermione honoured her promise to Snape to dance with him, but his fears of being ostracized were unfounded, and they parted after only a couple of dances, entreated by other partners.

The Elixir had cast aside their inhibitions, and both Snape and Hermione enjoyed themselves, smiling and laughing with each other before including others in the fun.

Thus it was that Hermione found herself being twirled away expertly by an exceptionally charming Oliver Wood, on break from training with Puddlemere United, where he had moved up from the Reserve Team, while Snape gazed unblinkingly at the stately Irina Todorova, part of the Board of Governors at Durmstrang, in charge of putting the Dark Arts knowledge there back in balance.

Snape was mesmerized, partly because Irina was beautiful: tall and slim, with long red hair and green eyes...dammit, he had thought he had exorcized that particular ghost...and partly because she was clearly fiercely intelligent; he felt a kinship to the way she spoke about the Dark Arts, asking for his opinions about the exotically dangerous subject.

After merely talking for a long while, Irina flicked a glance at the teeming mass beyond them and slanted a sultry smile at Snape. "Vile I have greatly enjoyed talking with you, Severus, I vos hoping to dance also. Would you be villing to dance with me, or should I seek another partner?"

Snape leant forward, the Elixir making him bold and his attraction making him feel possessive. "It would be my pleasure to dance with you, Irina. Please."

He stood, offering his hand to her. She rose gracefully and followed him to the dance floor, where a slow song had begun moments before. They pressed together, eye-to-eye with her in high heels.

Snape's gaze roamed over her face, watching her pupils dilate and seeing her tongue dart out to moisten her lips. Her breasts were warm and soft against his chest, and the impish look in her eyes told him that the sway of her hips against his groin was calculated.

He pulled her closer still, one hand sliding down to caress her lower back and hip, and his lips spread in a slow smile. Leaning forward, he purred in her ear, "I was right: it *is* my pleasure to dance with you."

Her sigh wafted over his ear, exposed as it was with his hair tied back, and she whispered, "It would be even more pleasure to spend more time with you elsewhere vunce the Gala is over."

As outgoing as he felt with the Elixir chasing through him, he was still stunned by the brazen come-on. He spun Irina, gazing about, seeking Hermione. He saw her across the dance floor, Oliver holding her just as closely as he held Irina, and their expressions were identical in their mutual interest.

A flutter of disappointment in his gut was quashed by the amazed surge of triumph that the beautiful woman in his arms was *most definitely* expressing interest in him, as opposed to guarded looks and hesitant reactions to his tentative advances. He pressed a gentle kiss to her ear and murmured, "Your place or mine?"

Irina voiced a low croon of delight and ground her hips against him again. "I have a private room at a London vizarding hotel. It is where ve usually stay when ve come to this country."

"As you wish."

Irina began manoeuvring them toward the edge of the dance floor, eventually pulling away and leading Snape into a dimly lit side corridor. Once they were around the corner, the noise of the crowd abated, and Irina pushed Snape against the wall, pressing her body against his and closing in on him with a forceful kiss.

Again, shock warred with excitement, and it took a moment for Snape to respond in kind, opening his mouth to her onslaught, tasting the wine she had favoured earlier still heavy on her tongue. His trousers were suddenly far too tight, and it didn't help that Irina was rocking against his erection, drawing grunts of pleasure from his throat.

"Ve do not have to vait until the Gala is over, do ve?"

Snape was torn between wanting to go straight to her rooms to continue their dalliance more privately and wanting to stay at the Gala to let people finally see that he was desirable. The idea that perhaps noticing Irina clinging to him like a lamprey might help *others* recognize that he was valuable as more than just a friend...and perhaps incite a sting of jealousy...led him to purr, "But the anticipation can make things even better..."

Irina pulled back and made a moue of petulance, and Snape ducked in to nip her pouting lower lip, sending them into another heated snog. Eventually, they parted, and Irina smirked as she started wiping her smeared lipstick off his mouth and face. "Hmm, you do have a point. Then ve should join the party again before ve make even more of a spectacle of ourselves."

Snape pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and scrubbed at the stains on his face. Irina borrowed it and touched up her makeup after cleaning away the colour spread

beyond her lips. When they no longer looked like a pair of randy teenagers, complete with telltale mussing, Snape led her back onto the dance floor, confident that his night would end even better than he could have imagined.

Over at the refreshment tables, Hermione stood with Oliver, chatting and laughing and enjoying the firmness of his muscles under her hands as they remained entwined from dancing. Though they had stilled, Hermione's gaze kept flicking out over the crowd, seeking Snape and his elegant partner. After a while, she realized that they were no longer in the dance hall, and a sizzle of discontent flared in her chest. Chin lifting in defiance, she pressed closer to Oliver, who had bent to murmur compliments in her ear. It was then that she saw Snape leading Irina back into the hall, both of them looking like cats who had managed to eat both canaries and cream.

Irina's hands wound around Snape's neck, threading through his ponytail, and she rested her head on his shoulder as they danced. Eyes narrowed, Hermione copied her actions and wrapped herself around Oliver, beaming up at him. He grinned back, liltng, "Oh, what you do to me, Hermione. I can't take my eyes off you."

A surge of power washed over her, and she said, "Indeed. And I can't keep my *hands* off you." He sucked in a breath and closed his eyes for a beat. When he met her wicked gaze again, she added, "What is it that I do to you, Oliver? Or better yet, what would you *like* me to do to you?"

His eyes widened and his jaw twitched as he clenched his teeth. He pulled her tight against him and guided her back onto the dance floor, his arousal evident in the hard heat between them. His voice was rough as he said, "I would *like* for you to not toy with me. I'm sure it's obvious how much you affect me."

A shiver of wanton desire skittered over her, leaving goose flesh in its wake, and she stretched up to breathe in his ear, "I'm not playing." She punctuated her statement with a nip to his earlobe, then nuzzled her way down his jaw to match his vehement kiss with her own. When they parted again, Hermione could see desire mixed with reticence in his dark eyes, and she murmured, "I'm not a schoolgirl, Oliver. And I'm quite capable of knowing what I want."

His brows rose, and he quirked a lopsided smile at her. "I believe you! What's hard to believe is that I'm the lucky bloke that you want."

They chuckled together, and Hermione pressed against him harder, whispering, "Let's just say that I would very much like to get to know you better, now that we're adults. Would you care to escort me home tonight?"

He sucked in a deep breath and rumbled, "I'll go wherever you like."

The heady combination of the Elixir and the power rush of attraction raced through her, and she pulled him down into another kiss.

The rest of the evening sped by on merry feet, and eventually everyone began saying their goodbyes in preparation for leaving. Hermione clung to Oliver's arm as they waved and nodded to their former schoolmates, but she steered him toward where Snape and Irina were talking to some Ministry officials.

"Severus! I do hope you had a pleasant evening. Oliver and I had a splendid time, didn't we?" Hermione smiled brightly up at Oliver, who blinked but nodded confirmation.

"Deed I did. Congratulations again, Professor. I heard about your change in fortune as well. I daresay you deserve some luxury after all this time!" Oliver offered his hand and Snape shook it solemnly.

"Thank you, Mr. Wood. May I introduce Miss Irina Todorova?"

Irina flashed a regal smile and inclined her head as she said, "It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Vood. And you, Miss Granger."

Hermione tilted her head and trilled, "Likewise. Well, Severus, Floo me when you plan to go to the Manor. Have a good night, you two."

Hermione's tone was a trifle arch, and Irina's eyes narrowed. Smooth as silk, she said, "Ve vill. You as vell."

At that, Hermione and Oliver exchanged a look of anticipation, and Hermione drawled, "We plan to," slanting a challenging look at Snape, who met her eyes with a similar look of steely determination.

Once Hermione and Oliver were out of earshot, Irina murmured to Snape, "Let us go to my rooms... finally."

Snape's lips spread in a slow smile and he guided her to the Floos. As soon as they arrived in Irina's rooms, she shoved him against the just-closed door and pounced on him with a vehement kiss, her hands roaming and pushing at his robes. When his mouth was free...her lips were latched onto his neck...he panted, "Irina, I want to be perfectly clear here: what do you want?"

Pulling back to level a blazing-eyed look of lust at him, she purred, "You. All of you. Preferably *out* of these robes and *in* me."

His eyes rolled back and a strangled groan bubbled up before he could rasp, "Well then, in that case..."

Irina's peal of delighted laughter accompanied their frenzied stripping, but was silenced the moment Snape pressed her onto the bed with a deep, exploratory kiss.

Back in Hermione's flat, she and Oliver were curled together on her sofa, languidly kissing while deconstructing Hermione's hairdo. Oliver was in shirtsleeves and trousers, his dress robes and shoes discarded in a nearby chair. When Hermione's hair was back to her usual riot of curls, she backed away and began removing her jewellery, setting it on the coffee table by all the hairpins and her gloves. Oliver tilted his head inquisitively toward her heels, and she smiled, nodding. He knelt in front of the sofa, placed her foot on his leg, and unbuckled her shoe. His hands caressed her stockinged foot, sliding up her leg before repeating the same actions on her other foot.

Hermione leant back on the sofa and peered down at Oliver through heavy-lidded eyes. Slowly, he trailed his hands up her legs, pushing her gown upward to bunch in her lap. When her knees were bared, he ducked down to press open-mouthed kisses to them, his breath hot against her silky stockings. A quavery moan issued from her parted lips, and she spread her legs further in invitation, reaching to feather her fingers through his hair as he inched higher, passing the tops of her stockings where they were clipped to the suspenders, his tongue darting out to taste her smooth skin.

Gazing up at her, pupils wide, Oliver breathed, "You asked me at the Gala: what did I want you to do to me. Your turn. What do you want me to do to you?"

Hermione bit her lower lip and arched in pleasure as his fingers slid higher beneath her gown to trace her hips. Voice throaty, she said, "Follow me to my bedroom. Pick up where we left off. Then... keep going."

His fingers gripped her thighs in a spasm of lust as he surged forward to pin her with a fervent kiss. Then, he backed away and stood, his trousers obviously tented, and offered his hand. Hermione took it and he pulled her to her feet. Smirking at each other, they hurried down the hallway to her bedroom, where they stayed through the night.

"Hermione? Are you there?"

Snape's voice issued from her Floo, and Hermione called back, "Be right there!" She shrugged into her dressing gown and padded out to the sitting room. "You can come through."

Snape spun out onto the hearth and spelled away the soot as Hermione curled up on one end of the sofa. "Would you like some tea?"

"That would be lovely, thank you." Snape sat down on the other end of the sofa, body and demeanour stiff.

Hermione waved her wand to start a tea service flying about in the tiny kitchen and turned to frown at him. "Honestly, Severus, what's with the formality?" Huffing faintly, she caught the tray and shoved the detritus of her Gala accessories to one side so she could set the service between them on the coffee table. Suddenly, she smirked and slanted an impish glance at Snape. "I thought we were supposed to use *your* tea set to share a cuppa with those biscuits I gave you."

Her reminder set Snape at ease and he flashed a grin. "We can Floo back to my quarters if you like. You might want to change first."

Hermione laughed. "That's all right. We can stay here this time. You'll still owe me tea at your place...complete with biscuits!"

They chuckled together and busied themselves with the tea. When they had both sat back with their steaming cups, Snape said, "That's actually what I was coming over to ask about..."

"Tea?"

"No. My place. As in, finally going to the Manor. You said you'd go with me." His eyes flickered with wary hope.

Hermione surged forward. "Yes! Of course I will. When do you plan to go?"

He cleared his throat and said, "Well... today, if you're free." Hermione beamed at him, nodding, and his cautious expression cleared. Smirking, he said, "I'll wager you'd still want to change."

Hermione grimaced at him, making him laugh, and stretched out one leg to poke him with her painted toes. "And what, pray tell, does my lord require that one wear to be seen in his elegant home?"

One hand snapped down to grip her ankle, and his breath caught in his throat at the silky warmth of her skin. Staring at her pewter-coloured nails, he murmured, "Just be yourself as usual, Hermione. You don't have to pretend anything differently for me. I'm me, not my home."

Her teasing smile faded, replaced by wistful affection. "I know that, Severus. I promise I won't let the Manor change how I feel about you."

He nodded, and his thumb rubbed gentle circles on the point of her ankle. After a long moment, he gave one last squeeze and released her, turning his attention to his tea.

Hermione drew her foot back, tucking her legs beneath her again, and said, "I can go change now if you want to head over as soon as we're done."

He lifted his sober gaze to meet hers and quirked a wan smile. "Why not? May as well get the first shock over with."

She cast a reassuring smile at him and rose, setting her cup on the tray. "I won't be long."

Snape watched her retreat down the hallway to her bedroom, scandalizing himself with the sudden thought that he wanted to follow her there and find out if the rest of her skin was as soft as her ankle was. He took a deep breath and focused his thoughts elsewhere, fortunately regaining his equilibrium before she returned, ready to go.

He took her hand and led her through the Floo to Snape Manor, where they were greeted by an ancient house-elf.

"Greetings, Master Severus. Oggy will tell Master Snape you is here."

The elf disappeared with a *pop*, and Hermione turned wide eyes on Snape. "Did you know there would be house-elves here?"

Snape blinked and shook his head slowly. "No. I only saw the Manor itself in Lazarus's mind, not any elves."

In a faint whisper, Hermione said, "I wonder how many there are..."

They were surprised by Lazarus bursting into the room, beaming at them as he threw his arms wide and declared, "Welcome to Snape Manor, Severus! Welcome home!"

Lazarus flung himself at Snape, enveloping him in an effusive embrace, leaving Snape to goggle awkwardly at Hermione, who bit her lips to suppress a slightly hysterical giggle. Snape cleared his throat and said, "Thank you, Lazarus."

His great-uncle released him and fell back a step, his delighted expression taking in both Snape and Hermione. "You know, I rather thought I'd give you the grand tour, but then I realized that it would likely be more comfortable if you were let go at your own pace, without me distracting you with tale upon tale of ancient history. You'll have plenty of time to get caught up if you wish. So, you're welcome to roam at will, and if you have any questions, just summon Oggy. You're welcome to stay for supper, too, of course. Oh, and if you see a room you want to claim, it's yours...well, except for mine. I'm too old to go moving things about, you see."

Snape looked rather overwhelmed, and Hermione furtively clasped his hand in comfort. "Certainly. Thank you, Lazarus."

Lazarus grimaced and extended an entreaty hand. "Oh, call me Uncle. I'm proud to have you as family, my boy."

Snape inclined his head and murmured, "As you wish, Uncle."

Lazarus clapped his hands and beamed at them. "Right then. I'll leave you to explore. Oggy will be able to find me if you need anything."

Both Snape and Hermione chorused, "Thank you," as he doddered out of the room, exchanging owl-eyed looks of bemusement.

Hermione squeezed Snape's hand and whispered, "I'm glad he decided to go. He's a bit wearing as it is, and I know you'd be positively frazzled if he kept up a running commentary through this whole place."

Snape snorted and quirked a lopsided smile. "You do know me, Hermione."

She grinned and leant against his arm. "And I know you're eager to see everything, so let's go!"

Turning to smile fondly down at her, he said, "My lady doth command, and I must obey."

Their laughter blended into a pleasing harmony as they exited the room on their journey into the past preserved as Snape Manor.

Hours later, after traipsing from floor to floor, exploring beautiful room after room, they were out in the grounds, admiring the gardens and lush expanses of green in the mellow late afternoon sunlight. Snape led them to sprawl under a shade tree, and Hermione leant against the trunk while Snape stretched out with his arms crossed under his head, staring up into the foliage above.

A companionable silence blanketed them in the drowsy heat, broken only when Snape heaved a deep sigh and said, "Thank you for coming with me, Hermione. And thank you for last night, too. You have quite the knack for making my life better ever since you saved it."

He flashed a warm smile at her, and she grinned back. "I did what any true friend would do, Severus. As for last night, we hardly spent any time together after the first couple of dances. I *told* you you had nothing to worry about. I had nothing to do with Irina being absolutely enamoured of you."

She averted her eyes for a moment, picking grass off her trousers, but met Snape's earnest gaze as he said, "You did so. I would never have been so carefree if you hadn't suggested that 'liquid courage.' Another brilliant idea; so, thank you."

Hermione flashed a faint smile of demurral. "Fine. You're welcome. I'm glad you had a good time. I mean... you did, right? Have a good time?"

She saw his eyes gleam with lascivious pleasure as he smirked. Then, he schooled his expression into a more polite one and said simply, "I did."

Eyes narrowing, she accused, "You spent the night with her, didn't you?"

He cut a sharp glance at her, pricking at her tone, and flung back, "Just as you did with Oliver."

They stared at each other for a long moment, charged as if they could dissolve into a row at any second, until Hermione drawled, "Problem?"

Snape looked away, frowning, and said, "Of course not! You can do whatever you like..."

She cut him off, snapping, "So can you!"

He cut a warning look at her and continued, "As long as you consent to it, the world is your oyster. But if anyone ever hurts you, Hermione, I promise you that I will make them regret it."

She blinked, taken aback by his vehemence. "While I can appreciate the sentiment, I assure you that Oliver did nothing I didn't want..." she paused and melted into a mischievous grin, "...and several things I did want."

Snape glared at her and rolled his eyes. "Fine. I don't need the details."

"Indeed. And you needn't give me the details of your liaison with Irina." There was a pregnant pause, and Hermione said, "Are you going to be seeing her again?"

Snape snorted. "I doubt it. She's all the way at Durmstrang, and I got the impression that she is quite the free spirit...not one to tie down to any one man."

Eyes twinkling, Hermione lilted, "Oooh, but did she tie *you* down? Kinky!"

Snape squawked in protest and flailed toward her, succeeding in batting at her knee even as she tried to dodge him, laughing. "Really! You said you didn't want details."

He cocked one eyebrow at her in challenge and she giggled some more. "Hmm, so I wonder if you'll just be a convenient shag whenever she comes to England..."

Snape snorted and drawled, "Honestly, Hermione, have you ever known me to be *convenient*?"

Brows shooting toward her hairline, she crowed, "Aha! So you *did* shag her! The first post-war notch in your bedpost..."

Jaw thrust out in defiance, he said, "So what if it is? I'm not the only one."

She tilted her head, eyes narrowed, and said, "What do you mean?"

Favouring her with an aggrieved look, he said, "Oliver."

Hermione drew herself up loftily and said in a dangerously low voice, "And?"

He shrugged. "And nothing. Like I said, you can do whatever you like."

"Including having casual one night stands with professional Quidditch players?"

"If that's what you want!" He scowled and slanted a worried look at her. "That doesn't put Mr. Weasley back in the running if he manages to get in with the Cannons, does it?"

Hermione buried her face in her hands with a groan...Snape knew full well that her former infatuation with Ron had fizzled out as soon as they had attempted fumbling kisses in seventh year. She heard Snape's wicked chuckle and glared at him through her fingers. "No. It does not." She dropped her hands and stuck her tongue out at him, making him snort. "But, if *Viktor* were to come 'round again..."

Snape actually burst out laughing and said, "Touché!"

A lull fell between them, until Hermione broke the silence, saying, "You know that Irina was just the first of many, right?"

He snapped a perplexed frown in her direction and said, "Excuse me?"

She tilted her head again and offered a gentle smile. "You're a decorated war hero with a fascinating life story, you were absolutely stunning at the Gala, and now you're even rich to boot! You'll have a parade of women wanting to add notches to your bedpost."

Shifting uncomfortably, he retorted, "I could say the same to you...except for the surprise inheritance part. But, of course, being a beautiful, intelligent young woman is quite the embarrassment of riches that makes up for actual money."

Hermione blushed and ducked her head, at a loss for words.

Snape stared into the branches above them and murmured, "Even if what you say is true, how can I trust that anyone would be interested *in* me and not my inheritance or what I can give them?"

She sighed, acknowledging his problem. "You can't, at least not right off the bat. But, honestly, Severus, right now, why even worry about that? Take the chance to have a little fun. Go into it with your eyes open and enjoy what they're offering."

He turned to stare at her, eyes wide. "Are you suggesting that I *use* them?"

Rolling her eyes and huffing, she shook her head. "No! At least, not any more than they might be using you. You never got to sow your wild oats, so take the opportunity now. There's no reason you should immediately be searching for someone to settle down with right away."

His startled expression shifted to one of contemplation and he said, "Is that what you're doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you sowing your wild oats before looking for someone to settle down with?"

Eyes narrowing again in suspicion, she said, "And if I am?"

Snape's lips spread in a smirk. "So it's okay to just have some fun of the carnal persuasion?"

Her chin lifted and she matched his smirk. "As long as you're honest about what's going on, then sure. These are enlightened times, Severus."

He laughed, and she grinned at the exuberant sound.

Voice rich with humour, she added, "I'm sure you and Lazarus will have plenty of parties in which you will be besieged by lovely ladies interested in your... company. You could become quite the playboy."

Grinning, he slanted a calculating look at her and said, "You matched me in my extravagance in formalwear. Will you match me in the excesses of this endeavour?"

Her lips pursed in surprise and she held his challenging gaze. Letting her expression soften into an impish smirk, she murmured, "That sounds like quite the competition...one in which everyone wins."

Snape quirked one eyebrow in response, and she chuckled. He held out his hand and drawled, "Are you game, my lady?"

She shook his hand and murmured, "Oh, indeed, my lord."

They locked wicked eyes until Snape shoved to his feet and pulled her up, his face alight with mischief. "Let the games begin."

Their laughter trailed behind them as they raced back to the Manor.

From Competitors to Conspirators

Chapter 8 of 11

Now Complete

Written for nothingness101, as her SSHG Exchange BINGO prize. She requested: "A slightly fluffy Christmas romance which is a call back to the pureblood Snape of pre HBP. Basic story line about how Snape and Hermione get together, and I'd prefer a post war story. Thinking formal ball(s), formal courting, curtseys, formal address (Lord and Lady), maybe some family jewels (and maybe some Snape family to go with them). Please feature a frisky drunk Snape and lots and lots o' lemons."----I did my best!

AU post OotP, the tale of how Snape and Hermione helped defeat the Dark Lord, how their relationship developed, and how Snape Manor came into play.

Thanks to Gelsey for always being there to help me with this whole writing thing!

School was back in session at Hogwarts, but neither Snape nor Hermione were there anymore. While he was still welcome to continue teaching either Potions or DADA, Snape took the opportunity for a well-deserved sabbatical, and Hermione helped him move his things from both the school and Spinner's End to Snape Manor.

Thus it was that they were once again sitting in the garden, taking a break from organizing Snape's rooms and lab and relaxing in the warmth of a September sun.

Snape toyed with his tea, gazing into it, his expression cloudy. Hermione sensed his disquiet and broke the lengthening silence.

"You know, we *still* haven't had our tea-and-biscuits date. Is the set I gave you in one of those boxes you still haven't unpacked?"

His gaze snapped to hers and he quirked a smile. "It is. I should have thought about using it when you're here, instead of whatever Lazarus has."

Wrinkling her nose in mischief, she said, "But my lord has china of such delicate beauty, I'm sure my utterly pedestrian set couldn't possibly compare."

Snape grimaced and drawled, "They may be beautiful, but they're also strange and sometimes make me feel like an impostor. There's definitely something to be said for the loveliness and comfort of familiarity."

He frowned at the teacup as if it had offended him, then pushed it away with a moue of frustration. Hermione murmured, "And something tells me you're not just referring to the tea set..."

Snape cut a sheepish glance at her and heaved a cleansing sigh at the sight of her gentle, encouraging smile. "How well you understand me, Hermione. You're quite right. I don't know what to do."

"About what? Or should I say about whom?" Her voice was kind and devoid of judgment, and a surge of gratitude welled up in Snape's chest.

"Astute, as always. It's about Lucretia. She's latching on rather strongly, even though I had made my intentions plain enough. I don't want to be a brute, but I honestly can't continue with her."

Hermione chuckled. "I thought that might be the case. Have you been keeping up with the gossip pages? After that photo was printed of you two at that party, I pretty much knew things would head this direction. Did you see the possessive looks photo-Lucretia was shooting at the rest of the guests?"

Snape tossed his head and scowled. "I don't pay attention to those rags."

Hermione favoured him with a pointed look. "You should. You're a celebrity now, Severus, whether you like it or not, so it's only smart to keep a weather-eye out for what the gossip-mongers are putting out there."

Sulking, he snapped, "What do they say about you?"

Hermione smirked. "Oh, you should see the comments they make about me. I'm a woman, so of course anything I do is doubly scrutinized and held to a different standard. When I was seen out to dinner with Ahmed, the scandalized intimations they printed were ridiculous! Oh, the pearl-clutching... You'd think I had straddled him right there in the restaurant or something."

Snape choked, taken aback by the brazen image she had just put in his head. Hermione laughed.

"Don't worry. I waited until we were in private before having my way with him. I do have some decorum."

Snape cocked a chastising eyebrow at her, then said, "Yes, well, what do I do with Lucretia? I don't want to hurt her, but I have to move on."

"So, tell her! Haven't you ever heard the 'It's not you; it's me' line? She got what she wanted...she just doesn't get to keep it."

"And what is it she wanted?"

Hermione flashed a wolfish grin. "Into your pants, of course."

Snape rolled his eyes and huffed.

"Oh, come on! You've shagged her. Don't even try to deny it. Guess you'll just have to live with the consequences of being so good in bed that she wants to stick around."

"Oh, for mercy's sake..."

Hermione laughed at the flush staining his cheeks. "Nice to see you're not conceited about it. Of course, if you're that good, then perhaps you owe it to womankind to spread yourself about a bit."

Snape actually cradled his heated face in his hands and groaned. Hermione laughed even harder in response.

"If you're really that prudish, then you better hope she doesn't get her hands on a Pensieve and show off to her friends!"

At that, he couldn't take any more and hissed, "Really, Hermione, that's quite enough!"

Still giggling, she said, "Fine. But this is just the tip of the iceberg, Severus. Get used to it. And practice your 'It's not you; it's me' speech so it comes naturally for all the rest of the women who will follow Lucretia."

Slanting an acid glare at her, he said, "Is that what you did with Ahmed?"

She shrugged. "Didn't have to. I made myself clear from the start, and he didn't get clingy like Lucretia did. I've got the easier end of the deal when it comes to casual flings. Generally men won't turn down the chance if offered, and they're not the ones who want to get all emotional and exclusive in those instances anyway. On the other hand, you've just experienced the difficulty of trying to keep things casual with women...even though you were up front about what you wanted, she changed her expectations after she got into it. It's a shame, really."

He grunted in acknowledgment. "So, should I send her a letter, Floo call, take her out in public?"

Hermione tilted her head in thought. "If you take her out in public, you run the risk of ending up in the gossip pages again, especially if she makes a scene. But, sending a letter?" She shook her head and grimaced. "That seems a bit cowardly to me. Have the guts to face her. Perhaps you could invite her over here for a talk and then you'd have privacy."

"Couldn't that be seen as a bit mean, too? Bringing her here to remind her of all that she won't have? You know I can't help but think they're only interested in me for the fortune."

Nodding, she said, "Then maybe you can ask her if you can come meet her at her place to talk, and if things get dodgy, you can beat a hasty retreat."

He slid down in his chair, slumping back, and flung his hands up to cover his face. "Ugh. Now I know why staying single and celibate was a good choice."

Hermione snorted and said, "Honestly! It's only one break-up... well, not even that, really, since you made it clear you weren't exclusive to begin with. It's part of relationships, and you'll have to go through it to varying degrees until you find the person you want to stay with. Which could happen at any time, so do you want to stay with someone who isn't that person?"

Snape sighed again and let his hands drop to his lap. Gazing sombrelly at her, he said, "What would I do without you, Hermione?"

She grinned and shot to her feet to bob a curtsey. "Why, my lord would be dead, of course."

He rolled his eyes and snorted at her saucy wink, then rose and caught her hand. "My lady is wise, indeed. You have my undying gratitude. Always."

He dropped a light kiss to her knuckles and she ducked her head to hide her blush at the tingle that wormed through her before murmuring, "Happy to help."

Snape kept his grip on her hand and guided her along with him back to the Manor. "Let's go unpack that tea set. I could use some more comfort right about now."

It was the first week of October, and the decidedly frosty nip in the air led Snape and Hermione to lounge in the deep window seat of his massive bedroom while they shared their at-least-weekly tea-and-biscuits date. If Snape had been female, Hermione might have been inclined to call their meetings "gabfests," but such a silly term just didn't seem right for someone as dignified as he was...even though she felt closer to him than she had to any previous friends, regardless of gender. Inevitably, they talked about their respective love lives, as their friendly competition was still alive and well.

"So, Kumiko didn't last long. You're with Julia now, right?"

Snape tossed his head. "Kumiko may as well have asked me for my autograph on her body, for all she seemed interested in me. At least she didn't cling like Lucretia did. But yes, Kumiko was quite quick through the door and out again, and yes, I'm seeing Julia now. We have another date in a couple of days."

Hermione swallowed her bite of chocolate biscuit...they were traditional now, for these chats...and said, "Mmm, so has she notched your bedpost yet?"

Snape slanted a reproving gaze at her and she grinned at him, completely unrepentant. Lips twitching in an effort to hold back his answering smile, he said, "'Tis but a scratch...so far."

Hermione giggled and leant forward with a conspiratorial air. "Aah, so will the scratch cut deeper next time?"

He let the smirk surface and cast an appraising look at the sumptuous four-poster bed dominating one wall. "You know, it's a good thing these notches are hypothetical...that frame is antique."

Hermione's gaze followed his, and she found herself staring at the rich pewter coloured bedclothes, imagining Snape entwined with a woman within them, engaged in lascivious activity. Her pulse sped up, and a blush crept up her throat to stain her cheeks. She sucked in a deep breath and shook her head, trying to dispel the images...along with the frisson of desire that they had incited.

Snape's head leant back against the window frame as he stared pensively toward the bed, exposing the long line of his throat, and Hermione fought the urge to lean forward and drag her tongue along it. Instead, she cleared her throat and said, "It's just as well that Kumiko was here and gone again so quickly, or you'd be trailing behind."

At that, Snape turned his attention to her, one brow raised in entreaty for her to explain. "What happened to Umberto?"

"Back to Spain last week. Then I met Allen. We're getting together tomorrow night. So, I may only have the lead for one day, provided your date with Julia goes well."

Snape snorted, one corner of his mouth quirked up in amusement. "Even more incentive to be as charming and seductive as I can manage with Julia..."

Hermione's gut clenched at the devastating purr in his voice. Airily, she said, "It's really not fair that you, just by virtue of being male, have to work so much harder than I do to get a leg over."

He pinned her with an intense look, leant toward her, and said, "It's *not* just by virtue of you being female...you being beautiful surely helps immensely. I have my looks to overcome, as well as my *dazzling* personality. I know full well that if I didn't have this inheritance and the ridiculous fame the media insists on foisting upon me, I'd be stuck quite alone."

Hermione bridled instantly. Eyes narrowing, she leant forward and gripped his chin, making his brows shoot up in surprise as she hissed, "Severus Snape, you listen to me! There is *nothing wrong* with either your looks or your personality...except for your apparent penchant for self-derision. As for being stuck alone, that will *never* happen. I will *always* be here for you. Do you hear me? Always."

Their gazes locked, and the moment grew charged. After several rapid-thudding heartbeats, Snape wrapped his hand around hers and slid her fingers from his chin to press against his cheek. Then, he turned to drop a feather-light kiss to her palm and murmured, "My lady is too kind."

Hermione swallowed hard, tingles shooting from her palm through her body and ending in her centre. Desperate to settle back into their friendship, afraid that if she responded to her attraction, she would ruin their connection, she rasped, "Is this how my lord manages to be 'charming and seductive'?"

Snape blinked, taken aback by her query, and cleared his throat awkwardly. He shook his hair forward to hide the flush warming his face and gingerly released her hand, backing away until he was against the window frame again. "A gentleman doesn't kiss and tell, my lady."

Hermione sank back and busied herself with the cooling dregs of her tea. "As you wish, my lord."

He lifted the teapot to pour a fresh cup for her, only to find it empty. He Summoned Oogy, and the brief interlude of requesting refills gave them time to regain their composure and settle back into their camaraderie.

A while later, Snape asked, "Have you received your invitation to Kingsley's Bonfire Night ball? He said the entire Order was invited last I talked to him."

"Mmm, yes. I was wondering if he was going to end up throwing a Halloween ball instead, since it falls on the weekend and he wants it to be a fancy dress party, but apparently he preferred Guy Fawkes Night...and an excuse to orchestrate a Weasleys' Wildfire Whizbangs extravaganza!"

"Who will you be taking as your plus-one?"

Hermione flashed him an impish grin. "Why, I haven't the slightest. How could I possibly know *now* who I may be involved with in a month's time?"

Snape nodded. "Fair point. Good thing he's not requiring an RSVP until the week before. Have you thought about what costume you'll wear?"

"Not much yet. I daresay I'd rather have something that goes with my date. What about you?"

He grimaced. "He *would* choose something obscure like 'Muggle television shows or movies' for a theme. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if Arthur didn't put him up to it. I'm obviously not very familiar with anything that has come out since I was a child."

"Then think about what you remember from then and go with it. It should be fun, Severus."

"I may need more 'liquid courage' to get all dressed up like a character. Of course, I'd feel much better if you were there with me again."

She beamed and said, "Never fear, my lord, your lady shall be there."

They chuckled together at her exaggerated curtsey as she stood. Snape rose and bowed in return, then said, "Same time next week, my lady?"

"Indeed, my lord. Unless our dates require an emergency meeting, complete with Firewhisky or ice cream...whatever the situation may warrant."

She winked and he snorted, and they linked arms for him to escort her to the Floo.

"Hermione? Are you there?"

Snape's voice issued from the Floo, and Hermione emerged from her bedroom, saying, "Be right there!"

When she edged around the sofa and dropped onto it, Snape said, "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

She waved an airy hand and said, "Not a bit of it! I was just putting laundry away. What's up?"

Snape's expression was distorted by the green flames, but Hermione thought he looked uncomfortable. "Well, it's Halloween..."

He trailed off, and after a pregnant pause, Hermione said, "And...?"

His eyes closed in a brief pained look, and he said, "Would you come over? I... would rather have company today."

Hermione frowned in confusion for a moment, then comprehension dawned. "Oh! Oh, of course! Just let me finish a few things here and I'll come right over. I'm sure we can come up with something to distract you, Severus."

Snape gazed at her gently sympathetic expression and relief washed over him. His voice was low as he said, "I am so grateful that you understand me so well, Hermione."

She flashed a smile and he nodded. "Anytime. I'll see you soon."

"Thank you." And with that, he disappeared.

That evening, they were once again lounging in his window seat, enjoying hot cocoa after a delicious dinner, when Hermione said, "So, who are you taking to Kingsley's party? You sent your RSVP back in time, didn't you?"

Snape nodded but shrugged. "I responded, but I'm not taking anyone."

Hermione blinked in confusion. "But... what happened to Siobhan?"

He slanted a wry look at her and said, "How does it go? It wasn't her; it was me."

"Oh, Severus, what happened?"

Heaving a sigh, he said, "She got what she wanted. Granted, she had a *little* more tact than Kumiko, but..."

Hermione grimaced and murmured, "I'm sorry. I had no idea. I was expecting you two to go to the ball."

Snape tossed his hair back and leant against the wall. "What about you? Who's the lucky man?"

She snorted and said, "No one. I'm going stag."

Brows rising in disbelief, he said, "I thought you were seeing Isaac."

"It wasn't working out, so I ended it. I certainly didn't want to be saddled with him for a party."

"I see. That's a shame."

"No, it isn't." Hermione's face lit up and she leant forward with an excited grin. "We can go together! Just think how much fun we could have, Severus! Like at the Ministry Gala."

Snape smiled at her enthusiasm. "I always have fun with you, Hermione." Then, his smile wilted and he wrinkled his nose. "What do we wear?"

Hermione chewed her lower lip in thought, and Snape's gut clenched with the desire to kiss that lip, but he blinked and focused on his cup instead.

"Well, what ideas did you have up to now? Did you come up with anything you remember watching on telly as a child?"

He squirmed and kept his eyes on his cup, sloshing the remainder of his cocoa in circles. "I don't remember much, but there was one show that my father used to watch. I was just a child, but he watched it regularly, and as long as I kept quiet, I could watch too. The characters were spies."

"Ooo, what was it? That sounds fascinating."

"I don't remember the name, but the man wore sophisticated suits and had an umbrella with lots of secret bits. He also wore a bowler hat. His colleague that I remember most often wore these sort of jumpsuits...all one piece...but very figure-hugging. She had several different colours...even one of black leather! I remember that one because my father liked it quite a bit. I thought it must have been hot." He snorted at his youthful folly.

Hermione chuckled and said, "I think I saw that show in reruns. I say go for it; you'd look quite fetching in a three-piece suit and a bowler, complete with umbrella."

Shaking his hair forward to shadow his flushing cheeks, Snape said, "Yes, well, it's *not*my costume that would be the problem."

Head tilting and brow furrowing in confusion, Hermione retorted, "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's a bit awkward to ask a woman to wear skin tight black leather to a party..."

She snorted. "It's not like it's revealing! I mean, honestly, my Gala gown was much more provocative..."

Snape's head snapped up and he pinned her with a heated look, cutting her off. "Indeed."

Hermione blinked, sizzling tingles worming through her. Suppressing a shiver, she murmured, "It's a costume, Severus. I think it'll be fun."

He held her gaze for a long moment, then broke away, clearing his throat. "Very well then. It's settled. We'll go in those costumes, and we'll endeavour to enjoy ourselves as we did at the first Gala."

Remembering how dashing he had looked, Hermione swallowed hard and said, "Exactly. I look forward to seeing you in costume, my lord."

At that, Snape slanted a smouldering look at her and said, "And I, yours, my lady."

Hermione sucked in a breath and gingerly got to her feet. "I better go do some research to see just what I need to transfigure for my costume. The party starts at six, so shall I meet you here, or would you rather meet at my flat? Or, we could meet there."

Snape could hear the nervousness in her voice and restrained himself once again. The last thing he needed to do was leer at his closest friend and alienate her. Rising and offering a polite bow, he said, "I'd be honoured to fetch you from your flat, my lady."

She smiled and he quirked a faint smile in return. "Then I'll see you before six on Thursday. Goodnight, Severus."

"Goodnight, Hermione."

On impulse, she darted forward and enveloped him in an embrace, pressing her face against his chest and squeezing him tight. His arms wrapped around her instinctively, and he bent his head to rest his cheek atop her curls. They stayed that way for a long, contented moment until she drew back and lifted her face to his. Millimetres separated their lips, and Snape raised a hand to caress her hair.

Hermione's gaze was trained on his mouth as he murmured, "I'm sure we'll have a grand time. As I said earlier, I always enjoy your company."

She felt giddy with desire, but wrenched herself back from the brink and said, "Likewise." Reluctantly, she backed away, her hands sliding over his back and waist until they dropped to her sides again. "Sleep well."

Snape simply nodded in response, and she crossed to the door, glancing back to see him watching her with dark eyes, before taking her leave.

Thursday evening, Hermione stood in front of her full-length mirror and surveyed her reflection, making minute adjustments to the jumpsuit and smoothing her straightened hair. The costume had her clad completely in skin-tight black leather except for her hands and face. Even her throat was cinched in a high collar with a silver buckle. The zippers along her shoulders and hips were purely decorative, but the functional one spread from her neck down to her navel, where another silver buckle hid it behind the built-in belt. With every move, she heard the creak and rustle of shifting, stretching leather, and her cheeks flushed at the kinky ideas that kept creeping into her head, feeling very much like she looked like some sort of dominatrix.

At the sound of Snape's voice issuing from her Floo, she called back, "Come in! I'll be right there."

Sliding her wand through her belt, she strode into the sitting room, only to pause in delight at the sight of Snape standing there in a beautifully tailored charcoal three-piece suit and matching bowler hat, leaning on a black umbrella. He tipped his hat with a smirk, but it quickly faded as he stared at her, eyes sparking with attraction. His voice was a low rumble of appreciation as he said, "Oh, Mrs. Peel, you're definitely needed."

Hermione blushed and laughed. "I'll take that as a compliment. You look smashing, Severus. I adore the bowler and umbrella!"

Quirking a lopsided grin, he doffed the hat again and twirled the umbrella. "It really is just an umbrella. No secret bits, I'm afraid. But, thank you, my lady. You are quite the vision, indeed. I can only imagine how many men will be entranced by you tonight."

Hermione rolled her eyes and wrinkled her nose. "My lord is gracious. However, I have to wonder how many of those men might be harbouring rather alternative ideas about me upon seeing this outfit..." She trailed off, then burst out, "Honestly, Severus, I feel like I should have a flogger or a crop instead of my wand!"

One brow arched in response, and Snape purred, "And just what would you know about such activities?"

Hermione held his gaze and said, "Enough. I'm not a complete naïf. There is something rather titillating about being wrapped in all this supple, smooth leather."

His surprised look melted into one of calculation, and he murmured, "Yes, well, your tendency toward bossiness may stand you in good stead in that case..."

Her mouth dropped open in astonishment.

Snape shrugged and continued, "What? I'm serious. If your predilections run that direction, then your innate ability to control would work in your favour. You've already proved that your attitude toward sexual freedom is quite expansive. I'm certainly not here to judge."

Blinking rapidly, she said, "You... could see me... like that?"

His lips spread in a wicked smirk. "In *that* outfit? Oh, yes."

Torn between being affronted and flattered, she blushed even more and smacked his arm, saying, "Severus!"

"Ah, see? Now you're on the right track."

She gaped at him, about to smack him again, but stopped when she saw his wolfish grin and heard his dark chuckle. Instead, she propped her hands on her hips and fixed him with a fierce glare. "Very funny."

Snape lifted his hands in surrender, still laughing, and said, "Please, my lady, I have a peace offering!"

He hung the umbrella over his forearm and held his jacket out to delve into the inner pocket, presenting a small potion bottle with a flourish.

Hermione squinted at it, then her brows rose as she whispered, "You didn't."

"I did. I told you before that I would rather have more liquid courage like we did for the Gala. You don't have to partake if you don't wish to, but I will definitely have more fun with it in my system as well as you by my side."

Hermione plucked the bottle from his hand and eyed it for a long moment. She looked up at him and met his challenging gaze. Eyes narrowing, she opened it and downed a dose like a shot, wiping the back of her hand across her lips before cocking one brow and handing the bottle back.

Snape's eyes lit up with unholy mischief and he smiled before he copied her actions. Then, he tucked the bottle away again and said, "Now I'm ready. My lady?"

He offered his arm and she slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow. The Elixir-induced euphoria spread through her, and she flashed a wicked grin. "If you think my attire and personality are so suited to control, then perhaps you should do what I say tonight, Severus."

His eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed in consideration. Heat rushed over him and he murmured, "Just what did you have in mind?"

"If I tell you to find me someone to dance with, you will. If I tell you to dance with someone, you will. If I tell you to get me some refreshments, you will. If I tell you to cater to my every whim, you will."

Snape found himself edging closer to her, drawn in by the desire prickling his skin. His voice was a deep rumble as he said, "Oh, my lady, you do know me..."

Hermione felt giddy with power and the Elixir, and she leant forward, her eyes on his lips as they came closer. Then, before they met, she breathed, "Take me to the ball, my lord."

He snapped back, straightening in an instant, his eyes dark and heavy-lidded. Lifting his hat and inclining his head, he said, "As you wish, my lady," and Apparated them to Kingsley's party.

Much like the Ministry Gala, Kingsley's Bonfire Night ball swept by in a riot of festivity. Snape and Hermione, riding the high of the Elixir, spun onto and off of the dance floor, both together and with whichever person they picked for each other to approach. It became quite the game for them, with Snape leaping to follow Hermione's every command, but always with a devious gleam in his eyes that sent the clear message that the tables would turn eventually.

When the throng assembled out on the grounds to watch the Weasleys' Wildfire Whizbangs extravaganza, Snape impressed Hermione with his quick reflexes, snapping open his umbrella to shield them from runaway fireworks while those around them dove for cover, shrieking. She hugged his arm, crowding close to avoid the cinders blowing around them, and locked dancing eyes with his, beaming. His answering smug smirk elicited a tingle in her core, and she murmured, "Hmm, and I didn't even have to tell you to protect me."

Snape's smirk faded into a sincere, sober expression and he leant closer to say, "I thought I had made myself clear long ago, Hermione. I will always protect you and do everything in my power to keep you safe." He clasped her hand and lifted it, dropping a warm kiss to her knuckles before moulding her palm to his cheek and adding, "My lady."

Hermione thrilled to his touch, and her Elixir-enhanced desire roared through her veins. As much as her being was clamouring for her to pull him into a heated snog, hopefully followed by scorching sex, she didn't want to ruin their perfect companionship, and she clamped down sternly on her impulse. Voice trembling, she said, "My lord's words move me, indeed." Then, she slipped her hand from his, dropping it to her side again and said, "Let's go in, shall we?"

Snape nodded and closed the umbrella that had hidden their intimate exchange from view. Wrapping her hand around his arm, he said, "As you wish, my lady," and led them back to the dance floor, where they scoped the returning crowd for more possible partners.

By the time the evening wore down, Hermione was engaged in conversation with a junior member of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office dressed as James Bond, and Snape's attention was held rapt by a young woman dressed as Daphne from the Scooby Doo cartoon. Snape had chosen the Bond fellow because of how well Hermione responded to the dapper tuxedo, and Hermione had directed Snape to the Daphne lookalike due to Snape's weakness for lovely redheads.

Bond seemed to be scoring points for being charming and debonair, as suited his character, and Hermione found herself enjoying his subtle quips about her provocative outfit, offering her own innuendo to spar with his double entendres. The sexual tension had ratcheted as tight as a bowstring, and Hermione decided she may have just found her outlet to release the desire that had surged forward for Snape.

Daphne had gone a little flustered when she realized who Snape was, and the stars in her eyes did wonders for his ego. After so long of her attraction becoming clearer and clearer, Snape took the chance and asked her if she'd like to see the Manor, and her instantaneous, excited response lit a fire in him, knowing that she would end up in his bed before morning.

Attendees started taking their leave, and Snape excused himself long enough to cross to Hermione, catching her eye as he strode up behind Bond. She nodded and excused herself as well, and they met off to one side, voices low as they spoke.

"I see you've found your next victim, my lady."

Hermione wrinkled her nose and said, "You may be more right than you know. Liam seems... intrigued and quite taken with my outfit's *sensibilities*."

Snape snorted. "Well then, I hope your experiments prove educational and enjoyable. For both of you."

Hermione cast a quick glance over at the redheaded woman watching them apprehensively. "You better not leave her alone too long, or she'll go to pieces with nerves. Will you be escorting her home? Liam will take me back to my flat, so you needn't worry."

"Fair enough. As for Carmen, she's agreed to come see the Manor..."

She cut him off, with a wicked grin, saying, "Or at least your bedroom in the Manor. Though I supposed you could give her the Knut tour in the morning."

He favoured her with a frosty glare and drawled, "Perhaps."

Hermione giggled, covering her mouth to stifle the sound. "I'll let you get back to her. But Severus, I have one last order for you."

He snapped to attention again, his gaze riveted on hers. "And what would that be?"

She pulled him closer to murmur in his ear, "Rock. Her. World."

A deep rumble issued from his throat in response to her words, and he backed away to pin her with a smouldering look. Mischief lit his expression as he purred, "Always," and edged away, flashing her a feral grin before spinning to rejoin his latest conquest.

A shiver ran over Hermione, but she firmly redirected her lust and turned her attention back to Liam, intent on exploring just how far beyond vanilla she wanted to go.

From Conspirators to Intimates

Chapter 9 of 11

Now Complete

Written for nothingness101, as her SSHG Exchange BINGO prize. She requested: "A slightly fluffy Christmas romance which is a call back to the pureblood Snape of pre HBP. Basic story line about how Snape and Hermione get together, and I'd prefer a post war story. Thinking formal ball(s), formal courting, curtseys, formal address (Lord and Lady), maybe some family jewels (and maybe some Snape family to go with them). Please feature a frisky drunk Snape and lots and lots o' lemons."----I did my best!

AU post OotP, the tale of how Snape and Hermione helped defeat the Dark Lord, how their relationship developed, and how Snape Manor came into play.

Thanks to Gelsey for always being there to help me with this whole writing thing!

Perched in their customary spot in Snape's window seat, sharing tea and chocolate biscuits, Hermione and Snape peered out at the early December snow wafting merrily to coat the frozen grounds. Eyes bright with childlike joy, Hermione said, "Oh, I do hope it snows enough for us to build snowmen!"

Snape snorted faintly. "Us? You mean you expect me to get all chilled for your entertainment?"

Hermione favoured him with an aggrieved look and said, "Honestly, you'd survive, Severus. You've still got the cap I knitted for you, don't you?"

His expression melted into one of warm affection and he murmured, "Of course I do, my lady."

She beamed back and said, "And I have the cap and gloves you gave me. They kept us snug throughout all our harvesting, surely a little frolicking won't hurt us!"

"Perhaps. Wouldn't you rather order Liam to entertain you, instead?"

Hermione arched one brow and said, "Oh, I have no preference about which of you I order about."

Snape chuckled. "I believe you. Granted, I'm not as docile a creature as your dear Liam is. And on that note, I do believe it's my turn to do the ordering."

She wrinkled her nose at him and huffed. "I can't get anything past you, can I?"

"Sorry, my lady, but you'd have to be much more cunning to out-manoeuvre a Slytherin double agent."

She flashed him an impish grin and lilted, "Mmm, yes, you do keep me on my toes. Very well then, it is your turn, so what do you command, my lord?"

He leant back against the wall and surveyed her through heavy-lidded eyes. After a long moment of expectant silence, he said, "This may be dreadfully mundane, but I want you to help me with the Christmas party. It's to be the night after Christmas, since that's a Saturday, and everyone will have had a chance to enjoy the holiday the day before. Lazarus is insisting that we have an extravagant event here at the Manor, to celebrate the first Christmas since the war ended. I need your diplomacy to keep me from ruining any amiable relationship I may have with my dear uncle. Otherwise, I fear I may resort to Unforgivables."

He followed his words with a deep sigh, and Hermione felt a pang of sympathy. "Of course I'll help you. But you needn't use your turn on something like that. I'd be happy to help you anyway."

Relief was writ plainly on his face as he breathed, "Thank you, Hermione."

She reached over and squeezed his hand. "Always, Severus."

He lifted her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles; Hermione flushed and smiled at him.

As he released her hand, she said, "Go on then, use your turn for something else. What would you have me do?"

Snape gazed out at the snowy night, pondering. He cut a measuring glance at her, licked his lips, and said, "All right. Tell me about your latest liaison with Liam." He paused, watching her, wondering where she would draw the line in their friendship, then purred, "In detail."

Hermione's eyes widened and she sucked in a breath, tingles racing through her. Holding his gaze, she said, "Are you sure you can handle the details, my lord?"

One corner of his mouth quirking up in a wicked smirk, he said, "If it becomes too much for me, I'll order you to stop."

A surge of heat washed up to tint her cheeks further, and she said, "As you wish, my lord."

Snape's eyes gleamed with interest, and he resettled himself on the window seat, getting more comfortable for her tale.

Hermione cleared her throat, pulse speeding up, and said, "Where shall I start?"

"I know your first encounter was rather governed by your black leather and all that it implied. Has it made an appearance since then?"

She licked her lips and said, "Every time. Unless we go out for dinner or something first, in which case I dress normally."

"And after dinner?"

"We go back to my flat and I change. By the time I come back out, he knows to be stripped and waiting patiently for me on his knees on the floor."

"Every time?"

"Indeed. Who knew, when you chose him as my next target, that he had such a powerful desire to be dominated? I guess it was just blind luck."

Snape sucked in a deep breath to steady the excitement pounding through his veins. "So when he's there, kneeling before you, naked, what do you order him to do?"

Hermione swallowed hard, goose flesh skittering over her in warning that she was about to turn a corner from which she could not retreat. Lifting her chin in a display of defiance, she locked eyes with Snape and said, "Lick me."

The silence following her words was charged, waiting for the fallout of her brazen pronouncement.

Snape saw the challenge in her eyes and refused to back down. They continually upped the stakes in their relationship, yet somehow managed not to cross the line into irreparable damage. He thrilled at the chance to vicariously know Hermione's sensual freedom. It was with steely determination that he said, "How?"

Hermione's head swam; she felt like she had just plummeted down a steep rollercoaster. Gathering her scattered wits, she realized that prickles of what reminded her of the Elixir to Induce Euphoria were spreading through her body. Her voice was low as she said, "First he has to unbuckle my belt. Then he unbuckles the collar and unzips from my throat to my hips. Once he spreads the leather, he leans closer and drags his tongue from my navel down..."

His voice rumbled up from his chest after she trailed off. "How far?"

"Between my legs."

His brow creased with an admonishing frown. "I said, 'how far'?"

She narrowed her eyes and retorted, "The tip of his tongue dips between my pussy lips and circles my clit."

Snape's eyes closed slowly, and his lips twitched. He knew the Gryffindor in her would rise to the occasion. When he opened his eyes again, they were darker than usual, and he said, "There. That wasn't hard, was it?"

"No, but he certainly was."

Her saucy quip took him by surprise, and his eyes flew open wide to gaze at her in amazement. "Touché."

She allowed a small smirk to surface and lilted, "Shall I go on, my lord?"

"Oh, indeed, my lady. Is he any good?"

"Satisfactory. Of course, he follows orders, so he's improved a great deal since the first time."

"What orders do you give him then?"

"I tell him to take my boots off and peel the leather off me. But, for every inch of skin he uncovers, he has to cover it with kisses."

"Reasonable."

"When I'm naked, I sit on the edge of the bed and order him between my legs to lick... and suck... and finger me until I come all over his face." She watched Snape swallow hard, then she flashed a wicked grin and added, "And he's not allowed to stroke his cock. At all."

"You are a cruel mistress, indeed, my lady."

"Yes, well, if he's good, he gets his reward."

"And what is that?"

One brow rose as she enunciated, "He gets to fuck me."

Snape's eyes flashed and he said, "How? Really, Hermione, you keep leaving out the details."

Her eyes narrowed at his lascivious smirk. "It depends on my mood." Snape inclined his head in a gesture for her to continue. "Sometimes I'm focused only on my pleasure, and I lay him flat on his back so I can ride him. I have more control that way. Other times, I just want to be pounded, and he fucks me from behind."

Snape's jaw twitched as he clenched his teeth at that vivid image blazing in his mind. A surge of desire flared up, but it was tempered by the lingering unease that such a position could be so impersonal. Brow furrowed in thought, he said, "Don't you ever want it face to face, wrapped around each other?"

Hermione paused. A wistful pang throbbled in her chest. Her voice was softer as she said, "That has always felt more suited to intimacy. And what I have with Liam... it's not like that."

His eyes narrowed and he scowled in concern. Body tensing, he leant forward and said, "What do you mean?"

She could hear the warning in his voice and recognized his protective impulse. "Honestly, it's not a bad thing. I look at it this way: there's a difference between fucking, having sex, and making love. You know I've been enjoying myself, having unencumbered fun...fucking and having sex. I just... Remember how we said we could have fun while searching for the person we wanted to stay with? Sex with that person could actually be making love. Suffice to say that I haven't found him yet."

"How do you know?"

The sexual titillation of her story faded, replaced by the wary thrill of baring her soul instead of her body. "I've genuinely *liked* everyone I've been with, or I wouldn't have had sex with them. I have no regrets about that. But, I haven't felt that special connection yet. The one that makes me want to be with them all the time. The one that makes me terrified of ever not having them in my life."

"Sounds like you're talking about love."

She rolled her shoulders and grimaced. "It's more than that. There has to be a physical spark too. I mean, I love Harry and Ron, but not that way. Just like with sex, I see a difference between loving someone and being in love with someone."

"Eros. Not Philia."

Hermione's face lit up...how many people could she have a conversation with who could so casually drop in Greek terms? "Eros is a good start, but I want to add in some Agape too."

Snape nodded and she beamed at him. His expression sobered and he looked away, staring out the window again. "You're not the only one still looking."

There was a long moment of silence, then Hermione murmured, "Severus, may I ask you something?"

He flicked an affectionate glance at her and said, "Always."

Her gut fluttered, but she took the plunge anyway. "Your question about having sex face to face... where did that come from?"

He licked his lips and took a deep breath. "Irina may have started things off with what you might call fucking, but since then, others have responded more to gentler, more tender liaisons."

Hermione flashed a wry expression. "I'm not surprised. Women are socialized to only seek romance and love, not sexual encounters without strings. I'm not exactly toeing the line here. Why do you think the gossipmongers so love to rake me over the coals?"

Snape scowled. "And that's part of the problem: I try to make my intentions plain, and then some of these women just... twist things into something they're not!"

"Like Lucretia?"

He rolled his eyes. "She was the first. And now Carmen is intimating that there's something deeper between us. It's not that I don't care about them. Like you said, I wouldn't be with them if I didn't, at least to some degree. But I don't love them, and I'm certainly not *in love* with them. And as much as the sex is enjoyable, the more of a disconnect there is about what we're actually doing, the more hollow the experience becomes, and then I feel even worse for not being able to give them what they want."

"What you want is important, Severus. You spent far too long catering to others' needs and wishes. It's about time you focused on you." He met her stern gaze, quirking one brow in inquiry when her expression turned sheepish. "And as far as our little games go...you do know that you don't *have* to do whatever I say when it's my turn, don't you?"

At that, he grinned. "Of course. But that's the fun of it. I know I can trust you to not put me in a position to *not* be willing to do as you say...you understand me so well, Hermione."

Her throat tightened even as she beamed at him, so she was only able to whisper, "I can't tell you how happy I am that you feel that way."

His grin softened to a smile, and they locked fond gazes. "Likewise." After a long beat of silence, they blinked and looked away. When their eyes met again, the intensity of the moment had dissipated. He cleared his throat and said, "Do you have time right now to help me wrangle party details? Lazarus said it was on me to prepare, as a way of taking the Snape mantle, but he *will* second-guess everything if it doesn't measure up to his standards."

Hermione shook herself, grateful to be able to settle back into the comforting familiarity of their camaraderie. The strong attraction she had for him could be dangerous if she acted on it. "Certainly. What did you have in mind?"

"Come along downstairs and I'll show you."

He offered his hand and she took it. Together, hands clasped, they made their way out of his room to explore how the Manor could provide its own festivities.

A few days before Christmas, Snape was distracted from his and Lazarus' supervision of decorators in the Manor ballroom by Oggy popping up beside him and saying, "Master Severus, Miss Hermione is asking for you. Miss is waiting in the library."

Snape frowned in concern. "Thank you, Oggy. Uncle, you can manage without me, can't you?"

Lazarus waved a hand and said, "Certainly! Go see your lady friend, Severus."

Snape nodded and spun on his heel, hastening through the corridors to the library. When he entered, he saw her standing in front of the crackling fire, her back to him, head bowed, and her arms wrapped tightly around herself. His gut lurched and he slowed his stride to approach more gently. "Hermione, are you all right?"

She twitched in a faint shrug, but she didn't reply. Snape stepped up beside her and heard her snuffle from behind the shielding curtain of curls.

His hands rose, wanting to touch her, but unsure of his reception. "What's wrong?"

He heard her thick swallow before she murmured, "I ended it with Liam." She paused, and a shudder rippled over her even as she choked back a sob. "He hates me."

At that, he closed the distance between them and enveloped her in an embrace, stroking her hair and whispering soothing nonsense as she cried against his chest. After her first paroxysm eased, he guided her to sit on the sofa and Summoned a handkerchief. She took it, wiped her face, and blew her nose before muttering a quick *Scourgify* at his damp shirt. Snape sat facing her, one leg bent between them on the cushion, pressed against the outside of her thigh. One arm was draped along the back of the sofa and his other hand was gripping her knee in comfort. When she sank back against the sofa, his free hand began caressing her hair again.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

She looked at his worried expression through puffy eyes and said, "I wouldn't feel right telling anyone else."

His lips twitched in a faint smile and she offered a tremulous smile in return. "What would you like to drink? Is this a tale for tea or Firewhisky? Or do we need to bring out the big guns and have Oggy bring us some ice cream?"

Her hand squeezed his on her knee and she said, "Tea and biscuits should do it, I think."

He summoned Oggy and said, "Please bring me a tea service with chocolate biscuits, and use my set."

Seconds later, Oggy appeared with the service and placed it on the low table between them and the hearth. Oggy bowed in response to their chorused "Thank you" and Disappeared. They busied themselves with preparing their cups, giving Hermione time to regain her composure.

After her first sip, she sighed and leant back again, closing her eyes at Snape's instant caress, brushing over her curls. "I feel so awful."

"Take your time."

She took another deep breath and said, "I've known for a while now that I should end things with him. I was just lazy and enjoying the fun, so I kept putting it off. But then he started talking about spending Christmas together and I froze." She turned pleading eyes to Snape and said, "I realized that he thought there was more to our relationship than I did, and it wasn't just recreational for him. I just recoiled from the idea of sharing Christmas with him...I'd rather be here with you, like we planned...and I had to do something about it right then." Her eyes closed and she shuddered again. "His face... it was so horrid! I hadn't paid enough attention before and had led him on like this. He was devastated. I... I've never made a grown man cry before."

Fresh tears welled up, and Snape gently plucked her teacup from her grasp to set on the table by his. Then, he twisted forward and slid closer, slipping his arm around her shoulders and pulling her to rest against his chest again, guiding her arm around his waist. She squirmed, settling closer, and he rested his chin on her head.

"Hermione, please listen. I know you feel awful right now, but that's because you have that laudable quality called empathy. And if there's one thing you've taught me in this whole 'sowing wild oats' thing, it's that you have to be empathetic to the people you're with, so you engage in whatever you agree on ethically. You didn't feel the same way about Liam as he did about you, so it was only ethical to break things off. I know you make your intentions clear from the start. Perhaps the nature of your power play clouded things for him, but it was better that you break it off than lead him on even more with false pretences."

Hermione's voice was small as she asked, "Did any of your women cry when you ended things with them?"

He heaved a sigh. "More than one. Carmen was quite distraught when I broke it off. It was incredibly painful and awkward, but there was no other option."

There was a long silence, then Hermione mumbled, "I think I should take a break from dating for a while."

Snape chuckled. "Ready to end our little competition?"

She huffed and growled, "Yes. The stakes just got too high." A beat later, she said, "Oh! But that doesn't mean you have to stop dating."

He squeezed her and murmured, "I think I shall be glad of the excuse, my lady."

She reached forward and picked up her cup, then shifted to sit beside him so that her head rested on his shoulder and she had space to drink. With his arm moved down between them, it was easy for her to lace her fingers with his as they sat in companionable silence with the comfort of their shared ritual of tea and biscuits.

When her cup was empty, Snape murmured, "Feeling better?"

She lifted her head to look at him and smiled. "I always feel better with you, my lord."

He grinned back and said, "My lady is too kind. I have an idea to cheer you up even more..."

Brows rising in surprise, she said, "Oh? What's that?"

His eyes gleamed with mischief. "Why don't I give you your present now, instead of waiting these last few days?"

She shot up in excitement. "Really?" He nodded and she beamed at him. "Oh, that'd be lovely! Let me go get yours, too!"

He chuckled and stood, pleased to see her changed demeanour. "Very well then. Let's meet back in my room. Decorators are here, and I don't want to be interrupted."

"I'll meet you there shortly." She burst forward and threw her arms around his waist hugging him again. "Thank you, Severus, for being there for me."

He rubbed her back and murmured, "Always."

She backed away and flashed him a grateful smile before dashing off to the Floo. Snape hurried up to his room and took her gifts over to the window seat, then paused with a grimace. He frowned in thought, then heaved a sigh and placed both packages on the plush cushion. Soon, Hermione burst into the room, both hands hidden behind her back. She bounded over to the window seat and grinned at him as she brandished two brightly wrapped boxes.

They sank into their customary seats and shared looks of giddy anticipation. Snape proffered one gift and Hermione bounced as she tore off the paper. She opened the box and lifted a book from the tissue within. "*Which Witch?*... ooh, what is it about?"

She eagerly flipped through the pages as Snape said, "It's about trailblazing witches throughout history. Every few years they update it; I expect to see you in it next time 'round." Hermione lifted shining eyes to him, stunned. He flashed a sheepish smile and said, "I figured that your enlightened, feminist viewpoint could appreciate others who came before you."

Her frantic fingers slowed to a more reverent pace, and she gazed at the pictures of strong women nodding at her. Her voice was low and full of emotion as she said, "It's brilliant, Severus. Thank you. I would be honoured to be included in this book."

His cheeks warmed in satisfaction at her reaction. She beamed at him and carefully wrapped the book up again before handing him a package. He meticulously unwrapped it, smirking at her huffs of impatience. It was a wooden casket with brass hinges and fittings. He opened it to see it neatly sectioned out into compartments filled with packets of teabags. Upon further inspection, he realized that there was a second tier, and he lifted the upper level out, revealing even more packets. Stuck against the inside of the lid, he read the list of all the teas contained therein.

"It's a collection of tea from all over the world. I so enjoy our tea dates that I thought it would be fun to try different things. The list tells where it's from and some other details about the tea or the location."

He carefully set the upper level back in the box and lifted a packet of tea, sniffing delicately at it. His lips spread in an appreciative smile and he met her eyes. "I look forward to trying all of them with you, Hermione. Thank you."

She bit her lip in flattered pleasure. They sat there, grinning at each other for a long moment, then Snape shook himself and flicked a glance at the other gift he had for her. His grin faltered, and he cleared his throat. "Uh... I don't know that I should give you this, under the circumstances."

Frowning in confusion, she said, "What circumstances?"

He ducked his head and rubbed the back of his neck, a flush creeping up his neck to warm his cheeks. "The...uh...circumstances that brought you here tonight."

She blinked and seemed to deflate a bit, sagging against the wall behind her. "Oh. Well... How about you open your other present, and then we can decide if mine should wait?"

Snape nodded hastily and cleared his throat. Hermione handed him the other package and he unwrapped it, not quite as meticulously as the first one. He glanced up to see her watching him, biting her lip, expression unsure of his reception. He opened the box and lifted the tissue away, uncovering a pile of rich, shimmering fabric.

Brow furrowing, he lifted the fabric, and it unfolded into a long black silk scarf. Beneath it was another one, and when he lifted it, draping it across his arm with the first one, he saw a third one, this time in the same midnight blue of his Gala robes. He continued removing each scarf until he had two black, two blue, and two pewter ones trailing from his arms. He cast an inquiring look at Hermione, who had managed to blush during his performance.

Her voice was low as she said, "I hope I haven't crossed a line, Severus, but, after our talks where you wanted to know more about the sort of play I've tried, I thought it might be worthwhile for you to have your own stuff to use if things ever tilted that direction with your dates."

His eyes widened. "These are for..."

When he trailed off, staring owlishly at the scarves again, she said, "Restrains. Or blindfolds. Of course, they're colours that suit you anyway, so you can always use them as they're intended, as clothing, but they're soft and smooth and can be used to heighten sensation when used properly."

Snape stared at the supple lengths slithering across his hands and swallowed at the surge of lust that coiled in his gut. His pulse sped up, and he fought to keep breathing regularly. She was his best friend, and she had just gone through a traumatic breakup. The last thing she should have to deal with was his inappropriate lewd thoughts.

He cleared his throat and smoothed the fabric into folds, replacing them in the box. "They're lovely, Hermione. Thank you."

She flashed a tight smile. "Perhaps your next conquest will be adventurous and you can try them out."

"Perhaps."

There was an awkward pause, and then Hermione said, "So, um, shall I go ahead and open my other present or wait?"

He stared at the package, then looked back at her suggestive gift to him. Apparently, he hadn't erred in his thoughts when he decided what to give her. He exhaled slowly as he handed the box to her.

Hermione smiled and tore off the paper. She opened the box and lifted a tissue-wrapped item, unrolling it to see that it was a bottle. Snape's distinctive scrawl adorned the label. Her head tilted and she frowned, puzzled. Her mouth opened as if she was going to speak, but she didn't, and went on to unwrap the other bottles and jars. When she had them all laid out before her, her eyes went round and she gasped.

"Forgive me..."

Her wide eyes snapped up to his pained expression as he spoke and she cut him off with a vehement, "Severus!" He stayed silent, pinned by her gaze. Her voice was carefully neutral as she said, "Did you brew these yourself?" He nodded. She looked back at the assortment and touched each one in turn as she recited, "Warming massage oil: Cinnamon flavour. Personal lubricant: Strawberry flavour. Personal lubricant: Vanilla flavour. Personal lubricant: Mango Mandarin flavour. Sensation Enhancing Unguent: Jasmine scent. Stamina Cream: Bergamot scent. Stamina Cream: Musk scent."

The silence at the end of her speech was charged. Snape's jaw ached with the effort of not offering apologies for his presumption.

Her fingers trailed over the handwritten labels. Her voice was barely above a murmur as she said, "You know my favourites. This is extraordinary, Severus. Only you could give me something this perfect."

Relief crashed over him, and Snape exhaled a long, shaky breath. Voice rough, he said, "It was all in fun, playing up to your delight in sensuality. I had no idea you would be distraught by the very partner you had been playing with all this time."

Her hand shot across the window seat to grip his. "Of course you didn't. No one could have known that. These are really quite creative and special." She lifted her eyes to his, smiling fondly. "Thank you. You've rather outdone yourself, my lord."

He smiled back, affectionate warmth spreading over the previous heat of desire. Grateful to have helped her feel better, he cocked an eyebrow at her and said, "Well, I do hope you'll let me know how good they are, my lady."

Hermione grimaced and voiced a rueful snort. "That may take a while, considering I'm definitely taking a break!"

Snape chuckled. "I assure you that I made certain they were of the best quality and should have a healthy shelf life. As long as *you* don't stay on the shelf for too long...which would be a tragedy for the wizarding world...they should be fine."

She ducked her head and murmured, "My lord is too kind."

A companionable silence fell, each of them admiring their gifts. Eventually, Snape said, "Well, now that we've done this tonight, we won't have that on our agenda on Christmas. Do you still want to come for dinner?"

She shot him an aggrieved look and said, "Of course! I'll be visiting my folks Christmas Eve and staying the night so we can do Christmas morning stockings and presents. Then I'll stop by Grimmauld Place and the Burrow during the day, and I'll be here for the afternoon. I wouldn't miss your first Christmas dinner in the Manor for all the tea in China!"

Snape lifted the wooden casket and made an exaggerated show of peering at the list of teas in it, saying, "Or Japan. Or Thailand. Or India. Or..."

Hermione burst out laughing, making Snape grin in satisfaction. "Touché. Speaking of Christmas at Snape Manor, will you show me the decorations? And have you decided what you'll be wearing to the party?"

Snape set the gifts aside and stood, offering his hand. "It would be my pleasure to show you the decorations you so graciously helped me choose, my lady." She took his hand and he shifted to wrap her hand around the crook of his arm. "And yes, I obtained new robes for the occasion last week."

They walked through corridors and down stairs toward the ballroom, and Hermione said, "I found a lovely gown, too. It's Christmassy colours, but I'm afraid you might think it far too Gryffindor for Snape Manor."

He slanted a mischievous look at her and drawled, "Oh, I don't know. We Snapes may have traditionally been Slytherins, but I can personally attest to the fact that some truly wonderful things have come from Gryffindor House."

Hermione laughed again and hugged his arm. "My lord is sweet."

Their banter faded as they entered the ballroom, but the warmth of their friendship stayed strong and true.

From Intimates to Lovers

Chapter 10 of 11

Now Complete

Written for nothingness101, as her SSHG Exchange BINGO prize. She requested: "A slightly fluffy Christmas romance which is a call back to the pureblood Snape of pre HBP. Basic story line about how Snape and Hermione get together, and I'd prefer a post war story. Thinking formal ball(s), formal courting, curtsies, formal address (Lord and Lady), maybe some family jewels (and maybe some Snape family to go with them). Please feature a frisky drunk Snape and lots and lots o' lemons."----I did my best!

AU post OotP, the tale of how Snape and Hermione helped defeat the Dark Lord, how their relationship developed, and how Snape Manor came into play.

Thanks to Gelsey for always being there to help me with this whole writing thing!

Hermione looked in the mirror and smiled in satisfaction at her reflection. Her gown was a rich red silk Regency-inspired ball gown, with gold trim around the neckline, under the bust, and around the edges of the tiny puffed cap sleeves. Her slippers were gold to match, and she wore above-the-elbow gold gloves. In keeping with the Regency look, she had kept the shorter curls about her face and bound the rest of her hair up into a coiled bun, allowing one long ringlet to trail from the base of the bun, and draping a band of gold beads around her head. Gold combs set with garnets held the beads in place and matched her simple garnet and gold post earrings. Her gown had a modest train, but a whispered spell would immediately have the train pinned up for ease of dancing.

She had agreed at dinner the night before to join them before the party was scheduled to begin so she could assist in the reception of guests. Thus it was that she Flooed to Snape Manor half an hour early, giddy with excitement, clutching a bottle of Elixir to Induce Euphoria in her reticule.

Oggy greeted her and summoned Snape. He arrived, resplendent in deep green formal robes with pewter accents, including one of the pewter scarves Hermione had given him for Christmas draped around his collar and trailing down either side of his chest. His smile of welcome lit up his face, and Hermione found herself beaming back at him.

"My lady, you are a vision of beauty." He took her hands and lifted them to press a kiss to the soft fabric of her gloves.

Hermione chuckled and said, "My lord is kind and gracious. You are positively dashing, yourself. And I'm so pleased that the scarf matches your robes; it suits you."

"My lady has good taste." He wrapped her hand around his arm and led her toward the ballroom. "Thank you for coming early, and for all your help to plan this event. I don't know what I would have done without you, Hermione."

She laughed. "Well, I'm ready to help one more time." She paused, and he turned to gaze curiously at her as she opened her reticule to take out the potion. "Elixir. So we can have it before guests start arriving. Now, do you want first dose, or shall I take it?"

Snape's brow furrowed and he wrapped his hand around hers, eclipsing the bottle. Hermione's eyes went wide in surprise. He enveloped her hand in both of his and murmured, "Hermione, as exhilarating as the previous parties were, I... don't think I need the potion any more. I don't want it either. Having you here with me is joy enough, and...what with being on a break and all that...I don't need the extra boost to feel comfortable approaching women. If you wish to partake, I surely won't stop you, but I have everything I need to enjoy myself tonight."

Hermione's gut fluttered at the warmth in his eyes and the tingle racing over her from his grip on her hand. She swallowed hard and said, "I completely agree, Severus. Who needs this?"

They exchanged grins as she tucked the potion back into her reticule before resuming their trek to the ballroom. When they reached it, they paused in the doorway to survey the festive decorations, and Hermione gazed about in delight. Snape looked down at her radiant expression, his chest tightening with desire and affection.

She hugged his arm and bounced in excitement. "Oh, Severus, it's lovely!"

When she turned her gaze to meet his, his free hand rose to her face, his knuckles lifting her chin a fraction as he leant down to press a tender kiss to her lips. She gasped, but returned the kiss with fervour, tilting her head and teasing his mouth open with her tongue. Tentative caresses of lips and tongue filled the moment with sweetness, until they broke apart, both somewhat dazed.

Voice shaky, she said, "Where did that come from?"

He quirked a lopsided smile and lifted his head, looking up at the door frame above them. "Mistletoe. Tradition, of course."

"That was a very different kiss from the first time you kissed me under mistletoe."

He grinned. "Indeed. We were both different then. But I was certainly on the right track even without knowing it."

She felt hot, and not just with the warmth of friendship. Ducking her head in a mixture of flattered shyness and flustered curiosity, she noted that her décolletage was indeed rosy. To her relief, Snape guided her into the ballroom, leaving the mistletoe to lure other guests.

By the time they had inspected everything, Lazarus had shown up, and the first guests had begun arriving. Snape kept a firm grip on Hermione's hand tucked inside his elbow, making it plain that she was hostess of this party just as much as he and Lazarus were hosts. Eventually, once everyone had come to fill the ballroom, and they had acquitted themselves admirably in greeting them all, Snape guided Hermione onto the dance floor, sighing in relief.

"Ye gods, I'm glad that part is over."

Hermione smiled up at him, wishing she had worn heels instead of slippers, so she could have been closer to his height, and said, "You did wonderfully, Severus. And everyone is having a lovely time. Just look around you."

"Lazarus will be pleased. I do hope that this fulfils his desire for such events in the near future. I've been to more parties and balls and gala events in the past several months than I have in my years of teaching put together." His statement ended with an aggrieved snort and Hermione laughed.

"Oh, don't you dare to pretend that you haven't enjoyed it, my lord. I was there for several of them, so I know better." She slanted a wry look at him and he grimaced.

"But, my lady, I was under the influence then...that Elixir, of course. I couldn't *not* have a good time those nights."

"We've no Elixir to affect us tonight..."

He tightened his hold at her waist, snuggling her closer to him and leaning down to murmur in her ear, "And yet I am having much more fun right now than I deserve, surely."

She turned her head to meet his eyes again and sucked in a steadying breath before saying in a faint voice, "Severus, you deserve so much more than you'll ever admit."

He ducked his head, his cheeks tinting, and rumbled, "Ah, yes, you know me as well as ever."

He punctuated his statement with another squeeze, and Hermione's pulse sped up as a flash of recklessness skittered over her, urging her to say, "Not Biblically."

Snape's head lifted, his puzzled gaze snapping to hers. Her eyes were wide at her own temerity, but she didn't shy away as he processed her comment, comprehension dawning and sending his brows toward his hairline. He blinked rapidly, then flicked a furtive glance around them, before guiding them toward the edge of the dance floor. Once free of the throng, he led her out into a side room, more of an alcove than anything else.

There, he pulled her into his embrace again and pinned her with a searching look. "Hermione, I know my second gift to you was rather... suggestive... and I know what your *phrase* means, but what I don't know is *what you* meant by it."

Goose flesh erupted across her skin as tingles of heat darted through her body, ending in a throbbing in her core. Breathless, she retorted, "I meant exactly what I said."

Snape's eyes closed for a beat as he inhaled sharply. When he opened them, they were darker than before, and full of wonder and scorching desire. He lifted one hand to caress her face, swallowing hard when she leant into it, pressing her cheek into his palm and sighing. Her hands moved up from his arms to slide along the scarf at his collar, the sound of her gloves against the smooth fabric loud in the charged silence.

His voice was gravelly as he said, "I thought you were on a break."

"I am. I'm taking a break from dallying with people I don't love."

Expression wary, he murmured a simple, "Philia?"

She wrapped her fingers around his scarf and tugged, pulling him down. She watched hope bloom in his eyes as she whispered against his lips, "Eros. Always."

They met in a gentle kiss that quickly turned into a fierce snog as they gave in to the attraction that had been building for so long. Hermione's hands twined into his hair, pulling him as close as she could, and his hands framed her face as they edged apart, breathing heavily and pressing their foreheads together.

Snape's voice was rough as he said, "Hermione, are you sure? As much as I am attracted to you, I can't just be one of your conquests."

A pained sound welled up in her throat and she bounced between darting forward to kiss him and backing away to meet his eyes, seeing the naked emotions in his wide pupils. "Severus, I've loved you for a long time now, but you are the one I want to be with all the time. Any time I think of not having you in my life, I feel a burst of panic. And I've been trying to ignore how much I want you...how much you turn me on...because I didn't want to ruin what we already had, or get in the way of you finding *your* 'one'. *You know me* better than anyone else, and that makes me feel so special, so cared for..."

He cut her off with a vehement, "You are!" and she smiled.

"I know. Severus, I know. And I can't pretend anymore that I'm not completely besotted with you. It's too hard. When you kissed me earlier, it all hit home all at once, and I just *had* to do something...let you know how I feel...even though I'm terrified that I'll destroy our friendship."

He had been staring at her in fascination throughout her impassioned speech, and when she finished, he whispered, "Nothing could destroy what we have, Hermione. My darling, brilliant love, once again you've saved me... this time from pining for you, wishing I were the one to fulfil all your desires."

Relief washed over her like a wave of euphoria, and she flashed a giddy, mischievous smile at him before she purred, "You can be."

He sucked in a deep breath, trying to control his surge of lust in response to her invitation. A groan rumbled up from his chest as he crushed her to him, descending on her with a ravenous kiss. Her breathy moan was muffled by his lips, but it fired his ardour even more. At that, their hands began roaming, caressing and squeezing and discovering each other's secret sweet spots.

A peal of laughter just outside the alcove startled them, and they broke apart with a gasp, eyes wide and dazed, taking in their dishevelled appearances. Hermione recovered first, rasping, "You've got to get back out to your party."

Snape scowled and mumbled a few choice oaths as he smoothed his clothes and hair, adjusting his trousers around the insistent erection that had moments ago been grinding against Hermione's hip. "This bloody party is the last sodding thing I care about at the moment!"

She offered him a moue of sympathy and cupped his arm in a calming gesture. "Severus, it's important. It won't last much longer. We can... pick up where we left off, later."

He stepped closer again, wrapping his arms around her waist and gazing intently at her. "Hermione, would you... that is... you're welcome to... I mean... I would love it if you stayed tonight. With me."

She beamed at him and drew him down for another kiss, tender and gentle. "I would love it, too."

They sealed the promise with a chaste kiss, then separated, reluctant to end contact. Snape settled his robes again and took a deep breath. On the tail of his long exhalation, he said, "You're right; I better get back out there. Are you ready?"

"I need a moment to regain my composure and fix my makeup. Why don't you go on and I'll join you in a few moments? Besides, if we appear again like this, it'll likely be obvious what we've just been doing."

His chin lifted and his eyes flashed. "We have nothing to be ashamed of...do you think I care what they think? I am proud to be seen with you, Hermione."

She cupped his cheek to soothe him. "I know, Severus. And I, you. But, decorum and all that."

He rolled his eyes and huffed. "Fine. But I will not leave your side again once we're back out there."

Her fond smile warmed him as she said, "I look forward to it...and much more."

He nodded and stepped back out onto the dance floor, leaving Hermione to lean against the wall, trembling in the wake of their revelations. She took several measured, calming breaths, then fixed her hair and makeup. When she rejoined the party, she searched immediately for Snape, seeing him in conversation with Lazarus near the refreshments.

Hermione responded cordially to passing greetings as she made her way over. As soon as Snape saw her, his attention zeroed in on her, completely ignoring his uncle. Lazarus noticed his shift of focus and trailed off, looking over to see Hermione striding closer. The vivid colour in her cheeks and chest, coupled with the matching gleam in their eyes told him everything he needed to know, and he couldn't help but smirk in satisfaction. He had seen their attraction building ever since Snape had moved in, even though they had both dated freely. Clearly, something significant had transpired tonight, and the air around them practically vibrated with energy.

"Severus. Lazarus. The party is lovely."

Snape took her hand and wrapped it around the crook of his elbow, covering it with his hand. Lazarus beamed at her and said, "It is a rousing success...on many counts." Hermione and Snape exchanged a puzzled glance, and Lazarus continued, "I've been wondering how long it would take for you two to come together. Congratulations, indeed."

They blinked at each other, startled, and Hermione blushed more while Snape drew himself up straight and proud. "Thank you, Uncle. You are the first to know."

Lazarus chuckled. "I daresay I am, considering it couldn't have happened more than twenty minutes ago."

Mortified, Hermione mumbled, "How did you know?"

"Well, you weren't together yesterday, and there was still something holding you back in the receiving line, but now... Any wizard worth his wand could feel the charge you two give off now." He laid his finger alongside his nose and gave an exaggerated nod, winking at them. "Honestly, I couldn't think of a finer Christmas miracle than you two getting together. You make each other happy, you see."

They both smiled, abashed and pleased. Snape squeezed her hand on his arm and she leant closer, gazing up at him. The adoration and attraction blazing in their eyes made Lazarus bite his lip and cough faintly. When Snape flicked a glance at him in response, he leant forward and whispered, "I daresay you could get away with ducking out a little early. I can wrap up and send off any stragglers on my own. No doubt you have quite a bit of catching up to do."

Snape inclined his head in a small bow. "That's very kind of you, Uncle. Thank you."

Lazarus waved his hand and grimaced in demurrals. "Oh, you're quite welcome, indeed. Now, go frolic and be free!"

Snape flashed a smug smile and nodded before leading Hermione back onto the dance floor.

Time seemed to both crawl and speed by as they danced, completely entranced by each other. Finally, as they twirled past Lazarus again, he snagged Snape's arm, arresting their motion and startling them out of their connection.

"Go on and get out of here! Half the guests have already left, and you're all but no good to me in such a state anyway." He shoed them toward the doorway as he chastised them.

When they stopped at the doorway, they both looked up as one, taking note of the mistletoe. Then, meeting each other's challenging gaze, they came together in a vehement kiss, laughing silently at the spate of surprised gasps rippling through the remaining guests. Lazarus sighed in exasperation and cradled his face, his hand over his eyes as he shook his head.

They broke apart, flicking matching impish glances at the staring crowd. Snape leant down to her ear and murmured, "Fuck decorum," causing Hermione to clap a hand over her mouth to stifle her shocked squeak. Her eyes were wide but sparkling with mirth as he addressed the spectators. "Happy Christmas. And good night." Then, he gripped her hand and tugged, leading her to hurry away with him, their laughter fading as they disappeared from view.

When they reached his room, he ushered her through the door, then spun and closed it, leaning against it as he watched her continue across to the window seat. She stopped and turned to meet his gaze, the length of the room between them. As one, their breath caught and they blinked, breaking their charged connection to glance away. However, they both looked in the same direction, and their searching eyes stopped at the sight of his sumptuous bed.

Hermione gasped, and they tore their gazes from the bed to look at each other again. The urge to hold her overwhelmed him, and Snape slowly stepped forward, gut trembling. She stood her ground, pulse racing and breath going shallow as he approached. When he entered her personal space, she found herself leaning toward him, and he ducked his head to meet her in a gentle kiss.

The gentleness quickly gave way to intensity, and they were once again wrapped around each other, pressing close, hands roaming. Snape backed away only enough to trail kisses over her jaw and down her throat, eliciting a breathy moan. Hermione's head lolled back, eyes shut, and she slid her fingers into his hair, guiding him further down her chest.

His head was filled with Hermione: her scent, the softness of her skin, the sound of her coos and sighs, the inviting flush spreading across her torso. He panted against the gold edging of her bodice, hot breath dampening the silky fabric clinging to her breasts.

"Severus, please; I want you."

With a groan, he wrapped his arms around her waist and buried his face against her chest as he lifted her, spinning her to set her on the edge of his bed. Her startled squeal changed into a purr of approval when he dropped to his knees in front of her and caressed her peaked nipples through her dress. Squirming, she reached behind herself and managed to undo the back of her dress.

Snape pulled back and looked up at her, eyes dark with desire. She held his gaze and pushed the puffed sleeves off her shoulders. His breath hitched as the bodice fell further, barely covering her breasts. She froze in a moment of uncertainty, suddenly shy, and her arms came up to cross over her chest. Snape sank back on his heels and took a deep breath. Gently, he lifted one of her hands and guided it closer to him, where he pressed a chaste kiss to her gloved knuckles.

"My lady is so beautiful; it is only fitting that I offer homage on my knees at your feet." Her eyes went round, fascinated. "There is no rush to reveal yourself. Please, let me pay you tribute..."

As he trailed off, he held her hand and smoothed up her arm along the glove. His fingertips teased her skin just beyond the edge of the fabric and she shivered, goose flesh rising along her arm and across her shoulders. The warmth of his hand seeped through the cloth as he slid down her arm again, slotting his fingers between hers. Then, he carefully pinched the tip of each finger, tugging lightly to loosen the glove. Once they were halfway down her fingers, he surged forward, grazing his lips along the fabric until his nose skimmed the edge. Lifting gleaming eyes to hers, he gripped the glove in his teeth and inched backward, one hand pulling the glove from her fingers as his teeth guided it down her arm. She shuddered at the sizzling tickle of his nose tracing across her skin.

Once the glove was free, he dropped it and took the time to press tender kisses to every finger. Then, he turned her palm up and nuzzled into it, bathing it with warm breath. At her sigh, he leant closer and dragged his tongue across her wrist, feeling her racing pulse under his lips. She gasped, and he backed away. He stared up at her with a smile as he began the same treatment on her other hand, and Hermione's bare hand snapped up to secure her bodice in its place.

This time, when he nibbled on her wrist, he didn't stop there. He continued up her arm, pausing to suckle at her sensitive inner elbow before nuzzling his way up to her shoulder and across to her neck again. Hermione felt treasured and enjoyed the feel of her fingers threading through his hair as he dropped kisses on her throat.

When he finally made his way down her chest again, and his chin nudged the bodice to fall away from her breasts, Hermione made no move to stop him or cover up. Instead, she voiced a shaky moan as he cupped one breast and dragged his tongue around the other nipple. He alternated between suckling each nipple, daring to drag his teeth over them in response to the tightening of her hands in his hair, and incited her enthusiastic cries.

After a long while, Hermione shrank away with a shudder, eyes heavy lidded as she stared at Snape's consuming expression and extricated her arms from the clinging sleeves. "Oh, gods... Severus, I need you."

He exhaled harshly and shoved to his feet, wincing as his erection strained in his trousers. His voice was rough as he said, "I'm yours, Hermione."

She looked up at him, grabbed the scarf draped over his chest, and pulled herself up, standing pressed against him. Her dress fell further, catching against the bed and her

hips. She shifted, toeing off her slippers, and tugged on one end of the scarf, sliding it from around his collar until it pooled at her feet. Licking her lips, she unbuttoned his robes as he followed her lead and stepped out of his boots.

His robes fell into a heap on the floor, and Hermione's eager fingers started on his shirt. Snape bent enough to grasp her dress and guided her to step out of it, then used his wand to send it to hang safely out of the way. He dropped his wand onto the bed behind her as he slid his hands down her back and over the suspenders holding her stockings up.

As soon as his shirt was open and tugged free of his trousers, Hermione shoved the panels to the sides, yanked them over his shoulders to hang between his wrists where the cuffs held him fast, and descended on his bared flesh with a smattering of open-mouthed kisses, dragging her chin and nose through the light dusting of dark hairs that trailed from his chest down his stomach to disappear beneath the waist of his tented trousers. His harsh gasp made her look up and quirk a wicked smile as she dropped to her knees and unbuckled his belt.

"Relax, Severus."

He wrenched his hands free of his cuffs, his shirt fluttering to the floor, and his chest rose and fell with his rapid, shallow breathing as he rasped, "Easier said than done, my lady."

She paused after undoing his trousers and gripped his hand, guiding his palm to mould against her cheek. Her eyes closed as she held his hand to her face, and then she turned to press a soothing kiss to his palm. Meeting his eyes with a fond smile, she teased, "Surely you have nothing to be nervous about...not if your parade of fangirls is any indication."

At that, he bent to pull her to her feet, pinning her with his serious gaze. "This is different."

His eyes searched hers, hope and uncertainty battling for purchase in his expression. Hermione's gut clenched and she trembled in his grasp. Her voice was barely above a whisper as she said, "Yes."

He pulled her close, kissing her fiercely, and she slid her hands under his trousers to grip his arse. The trousers slithered down his legs, and he kicked them away with an impatient air, leaving Hermione's hands against the black silk of his boxer shorts. His fingers trailed over her hips again, skimming behind her to unhook the suspender belt. When it was loose, he guided her to sit on the edge of the bed again, dropping to his knees and dragging his hands down her thighs, peeling the stockings away, still clipped to the suspender belt.

Hermione leant back on her hands, head lolling as she moaned in appreciation of Snape's strong hands baring her skin further. She heard him shuffling and lifted her head to see him squirming to peel off his socks at the same time he divested her of her stockings. Finally, they were both naked but for their pants, and they stilled, the import of the moment hitting them with full force.

She scooted back onto the bed, crawling completely on it, and lay down, only to grimace and sit up, hurriedly tugging at the beads and combs in her hair, tossing them carelessly away. She pulled at her hair, untwisting it and letting her curls float free, draping over her shoulders and grazing her nipples.

Snape bent forward, crawling slowly up the bed as he watched her wrestle with her hair. When she finished, he moved up closer, and she fell back onto the pillow again, her hair fanning out in a riot of curls. He descended on her with a heated kiss, holding himself up above her. Hermione's hands wound around his neck and into his hair, and he trailed kisses down her throat and chest, creeping backward to map her body with his lips.

When he nuzzled her navel, she jerked and squealed at the ticklish sensation, her hips thrusting under him. He growled and stared along her body to meet her glazed eyes. Her hands skipped down her belly to the edge of her knickers, dipping underneath to push them lower. Snape scrambled to his knees and took over, mouth slightly open in anticipation as he peeled the flimsy scrap of lace edged silk down her legs, exposing curls darker than those on her head. His cock bounced as he drank in the sight of her, bared to him in all her glory.

She saw the way his boxers shifted, and she whispered, "You, too."

They locked eyes and he swallowed hard. Nodding, he carefully stretched the elastic of his boxers past his erection, sinking to one side to shove them off his legs. When he rose back onto his knees, his cock twitched in front of him, jutting out with a slight upward curve near the end, the dark head peeking out from his retracting foreskin, shiny with slickness.

Hermione sat up, eyes wide and hungry, and rumbled, "My lord..."

Snape bent forward, meeting her in a kiss and urging her to lie back again. She complied, and he settled himself to one side, propping himself up on one elbow to hover over her face, his hand tangling in her hair. His other hand reached for her far hip, caressing her and guiding her to roll toward him. She twisted her lower body, lifting her far leg to curve over the thigh he had pressed between her legs. His erection slid over her hip and belly, smearing liquid and making him gasp at the sensation of thrusting against her slippery skin.

She rocked her hips, grinding down onto his leg, the damp heat of her cleft searing into him. They exchanged deep, exploratory kisses while they searched for a compatible rhythm to writhe against each other, hands roaming. Eventually, Snape found himself rutting on her hip, suckling her earlobe, and listening to the decadent sounds coming from her mouth. His balls drew up tighter and he felt the energy coiling at the base of his spine. With a groan, he purred into her ear, "I can't take this much longer, Hermione. I won't be able to last..."

She sighed, a languid smile spreading her lips as she lifted her leg from his thigh. Gently, she backed away from him, and his brow furrowed with sheepish disappointment. She read him like a book and voiced a low laugh. "Oh, Severus, I don't want you to *stop*. I want you inside me."

His eyes flew open wide, and he swallowed hard. He inched back, his erection no longer in contact with her smooth skin, and dragged his hand down her side, dipping inward over her hip. Her gasp and rolling pelvis were all the encouragement he needed, and he trailed his fingers along her slick curls, delving between her lips to tease her clit. Her back arched and she squealed, making his cock throb in response.

Employing everything he had practiced on all the other women he had enjoyed over the past few months, as well as every bit of information he had filed away about what Hermione liked, gleaned from their intimate conversations, he focused on her pleasure, knowing he could regain control over his own as well.

Heat washed over her, prickling her skin with sweat, and she gripped his shoulder in one hand while teasing her nipple with the other. His long, deft fingers slid inside her, stroking upward onto her G-spot, making her shudder and cry out. With two fingers plunging into her, sending white-hot tingles through her body, he circled his thumb around her swollen clit, and Hermione tensed, her voice rising in pitch and volume in her urgency.

Snape's voice was a dark velvet purr as he said, "Yes, Hermione... oh, gods, yes..."

She wrenched her eyes open to lock with his, and the incredulous joy and devotion she saw in him made her body clench...she convulsed on his hand, his name a breathless gasp on her lips as she reached her peak, awash in the love she knew was reciprocated between them.

When she came down from her dizzying climax, she panted, "Severus, please, I need you."

Careful fingers withdrew from her, and he rose up to cover her body with his, expression determined as he said, "Are you still on the potion, since you were taking a break?"

She flashed him a fond smile at his insistence on being responsible and said, "I'm on the monthly one, and yes, I'm still protected."

His lips spread in a relieved smile that vanished when her legs wrapped around his narrow hips, and she reached between them, her hand enclosing his cock and guiding him to sink into her eager warmth. His breath stuttered at the sensation of her hand stroking him, but he nearly choked at the ecstasy of plunging deep into her, so snug and slippery with the evidence of her orgasm, hotter than he had ever imagined.

Hermione uttered a rapturous groan as he filled her, twining her arms around his back and pulling him onto her, bodies touching from throat to thigh. Snape rocked his hips, grinding deeper, and she squeezed him, her inner muscles rippling along his length. His eyes rolled back and he grimaced, a strangled, "Fuck!" bursting from his throat.

She grinned in mischievous delight and did it again, giggling at the bliss that made him look years younger. When he locked eyes with her again, her laughter faded in a surge of emotion, and she clutched at him harder. Voice shaking, she murmured, "Not just 'fuck,' Severus... make love to me."

His breath caught and he thrust again, slow, indulgent strokes that stoked the fire burning in their hearts. It built quickly, and he breathed against her lips, "Hermione, love, I can't hold back..."

"Oh, gods, yes... Severus, please..."

He claimed her mouth with a desperate kiss as his body went rigid for a charged moment, then he shuddered and moaned, his hips jerking as he came hard and filled her. She could feel his heart pounding where his chest was pressed against hers, and he broke the kiss to pant against her neck as his muscles shivered with aftershocks.

As soon as he regained his coordination, Snape started to lift away from her, but she tightened her grip and murmured, "Don't go."

He pressed a languid kiss to her lips before whispering, "I don't want to crush you."

"I like feeling you so close to me. You're not that heavy."

His lips spread in a slow smile, and he nodded. "Roll with me."

He wrapped one arm around her and slid to the side, guiding her to face him, bodies still pressed tight. The movement caused his softening cock to slip out of her, and she voiced a petulant grumble. Snape silenced her with another kiss.

After a long while, he backed away and said, "I'm sorry you didn't climax with me."

She shrugged and said, "Hmm, if you hadn't already made me come, I probably could have done so as soon as I touched my clit, with you inside me like that...gods, you felt so good. We can always try that next time."

He blinked, suddenly tense in her embrace. She met his gaze, taking in his frozen expression as he whispered, "Next time?"

Voice cautious, she said, "Don't you want there to be a next time?"

Jaw throbbing as he clenched his teeth, his free hand stroked her hair and trailed over her face, fingertips catching on her swollen lips as he rasped, "Always."

She smiled, and he flashed an answering grin before descending on her with more deep kisses, holding her close. Their snogging became slower and slower, until Snape backed away, ambushed by a yawn. Grimacing in mortification, he said, "I do beg your pardon, indeed," to the accompaniment of Hermione's sleepy giggles.

"It's all right, Severus. I don't blame you. It's been a long, exciting night...in many ways, and I could easily doze off, myself."

Still sheepish, he said, "If you're tired, you're welcome to turn in for the night. I could have Oggy prepare a guest room for you, if you like..."

She cut him off, saying, "I thought you wanted me to stay. I thought you meant *with you*. As in, right here. Preferably in your arms, Severus."

Lips twitching with the tremulous smile that surfaced at her words, he rumbled, "I had hoped, but I wanted you to know you have a choice. I would love to fall asleep with you here, and better yet, wake up to you."

She beamed. "Then it's settled. Turn out the lights and let's get some well-deserved rest, love."

Darting in to plant a final kiss on her grinning lips, he scrambled to find his wand on the bed and shoved it under his pillow, muttering a faint *Nox* to leave them in darkness before dragging the covers over them. Hermione squirmed until she had Snape on his back so she could curl up beside him, her head pillowed on his chest, one arm flung over his middle, and her legs entwined with his. Snape curled his arm around her shoulders and brushed her hair away from his face, stifling another yawn behind his free hand before murmuring, "Happy Christmas, Hermione."

She squeezed him and nuzzled closer. "It is indeed, Severus. Happy Christmas to you, too."

They lay in the dark, sinking further into unconsciousness, until the silence was broken by Snape's faint whisper, "I love you."

Hermione's brain flailed into alertness again, and her throat tightened. After a beat, she felt able to speak and replied, "I love you."

The warmth of the bedclothes paled in comparison to that in their hearts, and they fell asleep together, the way they had realized they should be.

Hermione jerked awake, brain working frantically to remember where she was and why she was plastered against a warm body. Memories crashed over her, managing to both calm and excite her. She couldn't see Snape's face in the darkness, but she stared at the slightly darker silhouette of his head against the pillow as she carefully eased away from him in her quest to use the facilities. Tiptoeing around the bed, gently placing her feet, mindful of stepping on discarded clothing and accessories, she made her way to the en suite, grateful that the candle sconces flickered to life at her movement.

After using the toilet, she looked in the mirror while washing her hands and couldn't help but smile at her reflection before grimacing at the mess of her makeup and tangled hair. She grabbed a flannel and scrubbed her smeared makeup off, then raked her fingers through the worst of the snarls in her curls. Flashing a final grin of triumph at herself in the mirror, she left the door ajar enough to use the dim light to find her reticule and retrieve her wand as well.

Creeping back to the bed, she drank in the shadowy sight of Snape sprawled in sleep and her gut trembled with cautious joy. She tucked her wand under the pillow and slid back under the covers, careful not to wake him. However, when she curled up with him again, he stirred, pulling her closer and voicing a sleepy rumble. Hermione's heart thrilled to the gesture, and it took a long time for her to fall back asleep.

A couple of hours later, Snape roused, freezing at the feel of Hermione wrapped around him. His chest tightened and his breath caught at the memories of all that had transpired the night before. He didn't want to leave her warm embrace, but his bladder insisted. Gently, he extricated himself from her tangle of limbs, holding his breath as she huffed and rolled the other way, hugging a pillow, but she didn't wake.

He shut the bathroom door, squinting against the light as the sconces flared to life again. When he was washing his hands after relieving himself, he noticed the used flannel on the counter and decided to do a little cleaning up himself...he could feel the tug of dried come in his pubic hair. A quick but thorough swab down later, he padded back to bed, heart pounding at the sight of Hermione sleeping so peacefully. Scooting under the covers behind her, he spooned against her, pressing soft kisses on her shoulder and hair. She let loose a breathy coo of satisfaction as she snuggled backward, and Snape beamed in the darkness. For the first time since he came into his

family's fortune, he finally felt rich.

Epilogue

Chapter 11 of 11

Now Complete

Written for nothingness101, as her SSHG Exchange BINGO prize. She requested: "A slightly fluffy Christmas romance which is a call back to the pureblood Snape of pre HBP. Basic story line about how Snape and Hermione get together, and I'd prefer a post war story. Thinking formal ball(s), formal courting, curtsies, formal address (Lord and Lady), maybe some family jewels (and maybe some Snape family to go with them). Please feature a frisky drunk Snape and lots and lots o' lemons."----I did my best!

AU post OotP, the tale of how Snape and Hermione helped defeat the Dark Lord, how their relationship developed, and how Snape Manor came into play.

Thanks to Gelsey for always being there to help me with this whole writing thing!

August 8, 1999

Snape and Hermione lounged, sharing tea, under their favourite tree in the Manor's garden.

"Honestly, Severus, I can't blame you for wanting to stay home today. I'd rather celebrate the anniversary of the end of the war like this anyway...even if we *did* manage to have fun at all those parties and balls and galas."

He snorted and quirked a lopsided grin. "I prefer our own celebrations. What was it you said back at Christmas? 'Decorum and all that'? Well, bollocks to that. Besides, I have more to celebrate today than just the end of the war."

"What's that?"

He set his tea aside and crawled closer, kissing her deeply and pressing her back onto the grass. He covered her body with his, and they settled into the comfortable rhythm of touching and snogging, hips rocking and grinding against each other. His lips trailed back to her ear and he murmured, "You saved me. And now you're with me here, all the time. I couldn't ask for anything better."

Hermione smiled at him, radiant with love, then bit her lip before purring, "Mmm, I could."

His eyes narrowed in thought. "Really? What would you ask for?"

Her grin turned predatory and she said, "You. Spread-eagled on the bed with those scarves. Cinnamon-flavoured oil rubbed into your skin. And me having my way with you."

His nostrils flared as he sucked in a deep breath, eyes flashing with desire. "My lady, your wish is my command."

Heat raced over her and she undulated beneath him, grinding her hips against his burgeoning erection. "Is that so, my lord? Well then, make it so."

A deep rumble answered her as Snape scrambled backward, pulling her up as he got to his feet. "Always."

They hastened to their bedroom, matching smiles of anticipation spreading their lips. As soon as they entered, Snape locked and silenced the door and flicked a spell at the bed that turned down the covers. Hermione Summoned the set of scarves, wafting them to drop at the foot of the bed, and pulled the potions bottles from the drawer in the nightstand to line them up within easy reach. The speed and efficiency with which they accomplished this division of labour implied a deep-seated familiarity, as did the utter lack of hesitation in the way they stripped down, eager eyes watching each other.

Hermione tilted her head toward the bed, and Snape nodded, climbing on and lying in the centre, stretching his arms and legs toward the four corners. His cock strained upward, bouncing slightly with his elevated pulse. Hermione flashed a wolfish grin and sent the scarves slithering over his body and down to his wrists and ankles, winding around and securing them to the bedposts.

She crawled over him, smirking as his body reached toward her, his muscles tensing and standing out along his lean limbs. Teasing, she met his lips for a languid kiss, pulling back when he groaned into her mouth.

"Hush now, love." He sank back onto the mattress, eyes dark as he watched her reach for the cinnamon massage oil and settle between his legs. She poured it into her palm, then rubbed her hands together as she surveyed the delicious sight before her.

She began just above the silk wrapped around his ankles, working her way up his legs with slow, smooth, kneading strokes. When she reached his hips, she skirted his groin, voicing a low chuckle at his growl of frustration, watching the glistening moisture as it welled up and trickled down his twitching cock.

Hermione shifted to one side, continuing her ministrations down one arm and then the other, slowing her strokes even more as she caressed his chest and circled his nipples, eliciting another deep, rumbling groan from her captive lover. Finally, she reached the end of the dark line of hair that trailed down his belly, spreading out to frame his now-desperately-throbbing erection. She crawled back between his legs and met his heavy lidded gaze as she gently grazed her fingertips over his balls and up his shaft.

His body seized, pulling at his restraints as he sucked in a ragged gasp, his head slamming back onto the pillow. Hermione grinned and wrapped her hand around him tighter, pumping his cock in her fist, causing more liquid to spill over onto her fingers, mixing with the remaining oil. She stroked him for a long moment, then backed away, knowing his responses so well that she could play his body like an instrument.

He panted, rebuilding his composure, knowing what was coming next. When she could see that he was ready, she retraced her path, only this time, with her tongue. The light, tickling sensation, followed by the cooling of his dampened skin, sent waves of goose flesh over his body and made his muscles spasm, jerking against the scarves.

As many times as they had done this, she always thrilled to the ecstatic moan that answered the first swipe of her tongue around the slick head of his cock. The taste of his

precome mixed with the cinnamon flavour was like a sinfully decadent dessert, and she only allowed herself a few bobs down his length before backing away, making sure that it all wasn't over too soon. She slid up his body, dragging her stiff nipples over his chest and pinning him to the bed with a fierce kiss, letting him plunder her mouth in return, tasting himself on her tongue.

When she pulled away, he strained upward, trying to maintain contact, and she chuckled again. She locked eyes with him and shook her head. He gasped, licking his lips in anticipation. Hermione sat up, then moved up his body, shifting his arms and straddling his head. She could feel his rapid breathing, warm along her slick curls, and murmured, "What do you say?"

His answer was instantaneous. "Please. Oh, gods, *please* let me taste you."

She smiled and spread her knees, lowering herself further over his face. "Lick me."

He groaned, using his nose to part her lips so his tongue could follow, trailing through the juices coating her curls, evidence of how much she enjoyed having him at her mercy. He gloried in her scent and taste, tracing the patterns he had learned well in the past several months, delving into her cunt and sliding up to suck on her clit. She gripped the headboard, her hips moving to supplement his actions, losing herself to the pleasure. It was torture, being so close like this but unable to sink into her willing heat. He was so hard that he was beginning to ache with it.

Snape sped up as her responses changed. It wasn't much later that she cried out, convulsing and shuddering in orgasm as she ground down on his lapping tongue. He suckled at her swollen flesh, tasting the freshet of juices as they coated his cheeks and chin. He continued until she backed away, gasping at the onslaught and oversensitivity. Gingerly, she unlocked her grip from the headboard and squirmed back down his body, straddling his waist and feeling his dripping cock smearing against her back.

He lay there, panting even more, gazing up at her in adoration. Slowly, she leant down and kissed him, the faint tinge of cinnamon still on her tongue blending with the flavour of her come coating his lips. Snape knew his role now, and murmured against her mouth, "Please, Hermione. Please let me come for you."

She trailed nibbling kisses down his jaw and throat, licking up more cinnamon oil from his collarbones. "Mmm, you've certainly done well, my lord. Perhaps you deserve release. But how would you like to get there?"

Before he could answer, she rocked her hips, sliding her arsecheek along his erection. He voiced a hoarse grunt, then purred, "I need you. I need to be inside you. Please. Please let me fill your delicious cunt."

She shivered and moaned. "Oh, but I love when you say such naughty things with that sinful voice." She paused and kissed him again. "Yes, I would very much like that, too."

He sucked in a breath as she sat up, her knees squeezing around him tighter as she lifted up and angled her hips. His breath souged out of him on a long note of bliss as she sank down onto his cock in one slow movement, adding a little grind once he was fully sheathed inside her.

They stayed motionless for a moment, staring at each other, reading the burning desire and love in their eyes. Then, they both inhaled and Hermione began a deliberate, slow, sensuous pace of riding him. Snape's eyes closed and he moaned at the sensation, but then he struggled to open his eyes to watch the erotic vision of Hermione's sinuous movements above him.

He had been so hard for so long that they both knew it wouldn't take too long for Hermione to wring his climax from his bound body. She gazed down at him in triumphant delight, her throaty purrs and breathy sighs sounding in counterpoint to his deeper grunts and rough panting. Sinking down onto him, she rocked her hips and squeezed his cock inside her, making him writhe against his restraints with a shout.

She squeezed him in a steady rhythm, watching his expression twist into a rictus of ecstasy, then employed the final step in her plan to make him come undone: quickly, she rose up, letting his erection slide out until only the head was within her, then started slamming down onto him with long, fast strokes, squeezing every time she was fully impaled. At that, Snape's hand clenched around the silk, muscles all over his taut body standing out in stark relief as he voiced a strangled cry, trembling as he came.

Hermione gentled her motions, drawing out every last shudder of his orgasm, then draped herself against him, muttering the spell to release his limbs...a bit of wandless magic she had perfected over the past several months...and smiling as he immediately wrapped his arms around her and pulled her up for a thorough kiss.

They lay quietly, snogging as their heartbeats slowed to a calmer rate, and Hermione voiced a dissatisfied noise when his flaccid cock slipped out of her. Snape took the opportunity to roll them over, then settle alongside her, still pressed tightly against each other, grazing lazy fingers over warm skin. Hermione nuzzled against his chest and inhaled, then said, "Mmm, you smell so good. Cinnamon spicy and sweet and Severus...my favourite combination."

Snape chuckled. "For now. Until you decide that you want a different flavour to be your favourite. Of course, any time you want anything, my skills are at your service."

She squirmed until she had pushed him onto his back and propped her chin on his chest, smirking at him with dancing eyes. "Oh, my lord, I *always* want your skills, and I do so enjoy you being at my service. Always."

He flashed a lopsided grin and murmured, "And, it is always a pleasure to serve...or service...you, my lady. Always."

They both dissolved into laughter, finally ending it with another scorching yet tender kiss, content to continue *this* celebration of post-war happiness for the rest of their lives.

*****The End*****