

Gentle Hands

by ConstantComment

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One-shot. Slightly DH-compliant.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer & A/N: *Rowling's characters, my story! I decided I'd submit a one-shot that was *CROSSES FINGERS* to your liking...*

Hermione Granger sat at the kitchen table at Grimmauld Place, warming her hands with her mug of tea and staring blankly at the wall. She had been deep in thought, contemplating the Big Bang Theory and Reflexology, of all things, but now her mind drew a pleasant blank. That had been the purpose, anyway. It was enough to think about Voldemort all the time; sometimes it was better to not think at all where the megalomaniac was concerned. But of course, it wouldn't be long before the un-thinking made your tea cold, and Hermione could not have that. She raised the mug to her lips, smelling orange, spice and plenty of sugar, only to promptly spill it all over her jumper at the sound in the hall.

She bolted to the doorway to see a dark cloaked figure being accosted by the phantom-Dumbledore.

"Severus Snape?" It boomed.

And the figure collapsed in bodily tremors, gasping for breath as if it had been knocked out of him.

Despite the fact that this was a man robed in Death Eater attire, despite the fact that she was to trust no one during these times, and despite the fact that she was scared for her life, Hermione felt her chest constrict painfully and strode towards the crumpled heap of dark cloth behind an unpleasant rendition of Dumbledore, post mortem. As she ran, she asked herself fleetingly WHY THE HELL no one had thought to remove the ghastly apparition months ago.

"I did not kill you, Professor Dumbledore," she said quickly, and the vision burst into dust again as the word 'kill' passed her lips.

The man...for it could only be a man due to the broadness of his shoulders...sobbed heavily after her words. She knelt down and lit her wand, bringing it to his mask ignoring his shuddering response. The man quickly raised a shaking hand up to shield his eyes, cowering away. Her wand met the point between his eyes, briefly, before she realized he was acting in self-defence, and lowered it once more. He had no wand in his hand to protect himself with. His mask muffled his ragged breathing, and Hermione felt another constriction in her chest as he lowered his head.

But then she realized that she had no idea who this man was, although she had a good idea. It would not do to have a curiously talented Death Eater acting his way through a meltdown to distract her while others could descend upon the sleeping occupants of the house.

"May I?" she asked quietly, and when he did not object, she tentatively slid the mask from his face with her wand. The black smoke that swept away the silver disguise was quite intriguing to Hermione but not quite as intriguing as the man now uncovered before her. His face was contorted in pain. His cheeks were wet with tears. His eyes expressed so much agony that Hermione fought her own sob that threatened to escape her. His identity was most definitely Severus Snape.

He looked up at her, eyes dull and almost unfocused. He was clearly in pain and she was doing nothing for him by staring at him. She made a split-second decision, hoping against all logic that the man in front of her was not the ruthless murderer that was his reputation...that he was seeking help, and that he was choosing the right side. "Professor..." his head snapped up and his eyes alit with recognition "...will you allow me to take you upstairs?"

His sobs had quieted immediately after she'd dissolved his mask, but his shoulders and limbs shook furiously with what were surely the after-effects of the Cruciatus. He slowly reached for her and his hands found her small shoulders, and he leaned into her as a new fit of cries echoed in the long, dark hallway, reminding her of a small neglected child rather than a merciless Death Eater.

She wove her hands into his hair, stroking the nape of his neck while he cried, and rocked back and forth, whispering incoherent comforts into his ear as he curled into her warmth. His thin linen shirt was soaked to the bone, she discovered, and it was early February. She needed to clean him up and warm him up to prevent the possibility of hypothermia.

"C'mon. Let's get you to a bath, Pro..." The man tensed in her arms. "Severus." He allowed her to sling an arm around his waist and put an arm over her shoulders in acquiescence. As quietly as possible, she struggled up the stairs and into her room, the nearest to the stairs, conveniently.

He muttered near-silent thanks as she lowered him onto her unmade bed, the covers still rumpled from when she had left it earlier that night. He sat, staring at the floor until she touched his shoulder lightly, and his eyes slid, unfocused, to hers.

"Despite my rather Gryffindor tendencies of jumping head-first into things without careful consideration, I must ask you to make a vow that you will not wittingly harm me from this point onward until you leave, Severus Snape, or I shall have to turn you away." She lifted her right hand for him to shake, and he took it, grasping it weakly. Although he may have been out of it, to make a wizard's vow was rather serious; he'd have no fatal consequences, just a week's worth of whatever punishment she had been thinking of at the time. Hermione could be extremely creative with her hexes and her former professor probably knew that, so this proved that he had no intentions of strangling her.

With a small voice he muttered, "I will not harm you, Hermione Granger." And a thin, yellow smoke wrapped around their hands and then dissolved with a light 'pff'.

"I'll help you undress, Severus. Now, come on." Hermione knelt down in front of him and began with his boots...ugly, dragon-hide things that laced up mid-calf. She untied the double-knot easily enough, but there were so many catches along the way that she was already quite frustrated by the end of the first boot. The second came off easier, and she rolled off his muddied socks, revealing long, elegant feet, ghostly pale with pronounced ligaments and narrow toes. Forgetting herself she reached out to trace a blue vein down the centre of his left foot and he jumped back, a half-hearted frown that looked more uncomfortable than enraged passing across his face. She smiled faintly...he was human after all. And ticklish, too!

Next, she stood to help him out of his sweaty shirt and began passing the pearly buttons through the thin holes. He watched her face as she did so, and Hermione felt more than a little uncomfortable...gone was the authoritative man whom she had feared for years, and in his place sat a broken one, gazing up at her as if she were some angel. Gods, he had no idea where he was.

His breath hitched as she tugged his shirttails out of his trousers...oh, what this would look like to the uninformed passer-by. Pushing the linen off of his shoulders, revealing his marred chest, dried blood and scars mapping what would have been a clear expanse of smooth white, she asked him to stand up and he did so, absently scratching at his Dark Mark that was probably burning at this very moment. She shucked off his trousers as quickly as possible without throwing off his balance, and he stepped out of them slowly, standing nearly starkers in her bedroom. Laying his wizarding robes over the radiator in the corner of the room, she took a couple breaths and then turned to a side door in the middle of the left wall of her chambers.

She tried to not scream in her head, *Severus Snape! Starkers! In my bedroom!* as she ran to the loo and turned the tap to fill the bath with steaming water.

"Severus?" she called from her kneeling position by the bath. The man did not respond, and Hermione leaned forward to see him through the doorway. He was again sitting on her bed, her pillow hugged to him tightly. He was clearly unaware of himself. Hermione's eyes filled with tears both at the endearing sight and with the hurt she felt for him. How much had he been tortured for him to revert to this?

She turned off the water once the tub was full, and she strode over to him, holding out her hand for him to take it. He did so, his large hand fitting nicely around her small fingers. She led him to the bath and as she removed his pants her knuckles grazed his upper thighs, and she couldn't keep the fierce blush from her face as his penis came into view. Even so, she dutifully helped him into the tub and knelt beside the edge as he sat down, facing away from her. She took her wand out of its sheath in her pyjama sleeve and conjured a ceramic pitcher, dipping the earthenware into the warm water and pouring it out over his pale shoulders. His spine and ribs stood out under his skin, she noticed, as the water washed the grime away to reveal old scars. She knitted the newer gashes together, singing under her breath in Latin as she did so, then sat on the edge facing him to do the same to his chest. There was a particularly nasty one across his left pectoral, and she reached out a hand to it...this one required more advanced forms of magic, and Gaelic, too.

He sighed as her cool hands brushed over the slash, knitting the skin together again as she sang in poignant undertones. "Good as new," she whispered, and his eyes snapped to hers, suddenly focused, but he did not move. Perhaps he realized where he was, now. "I'm going to wash your hair now, Severus. If that's alright with you..."

He nodded, closing his eyes and turning away from her, the water sloshing up and hitting her upper thigh where she sat. Ignoring the cool feeling of evaporation, she took up her lavender shampoo and squirted a dollop into the palm of her hand. He tilted his head back and she began lathering his scalp with the fragrant soap. She worked the roots all the way down to the ends of his long hair, and on impulse, she grabbed her wand and severed all the split ends, cutting off about an inch of hair. She *Evanescod* the stuff and cleaned her hands before massaging his scalp again. She spread her fingers and worked up from the nape of his neck, eliciting a stifled groan from him.

"Has anyone told you how good you are?" His gravelly voice broke the quietude.

"Erm, I don't usually wash others' hair..."

"No, how *good* you are. To do this, without prejudice, without outward disgust... You should have killed me the moment I broke into this place." His breath hitched again as she combed the hair out of his eyes with her soft fingers.

"Why did you come here, then, if you thought we would kill you?"

"I had hoped..." he trailed off. She could hear the disgust he had for his own words as he said them.

"Well, you hoped right, Severus," she declared as she wiped the suds from his hair. He was silent as she dipped the pitcher in the water again and rinsed his hair clean. It looked amazing now, which did not help the situation. He helped her to scrub his body with her body wash...a pretty feminine lavender-vanilla scrub...she washing his back and he half-heartedly washing his legs and torso. Once more she poured water over his body and he was sufficiently clean.

Just then there was a quiet knock at the bedroom door and both jumped, Hermione nearly joining her professor in the tub.

"Hermione?" The muffled voice of Ronald Weasley could be heard through the door.

"Coming, Ron." Hermione looked around, panicked, and tossed Severus her towel. She closed the door on him and rushed over to the door to her room. "What do you want?" she nearly snarled as she opened the door.

"I heard the water running, 'Mione. What are you doing up? It's nearly two," the redhead spoke groggily.

"I couldn't sleep, so I decided to take a bath. Why?"

"Oh, can I join?" he joked, a crooked grin crossing his face before she smacked his shoulder.

"No!" she growled.

"I was joking, love. Just wanted to make sure you were doing okay."

"Yeah, well I'm fine. And a little grumpy, so I'll just see you in the morning okay?"

"All right. G'night. I'll tell Harry not to wake you tomorrow mornin', then."

"Good night, Ron." She closed the door as Ron turned back down the hallway, and warded it for sound and intruders and maybe a few stinging hexes if the dunderheads tried to unlock it. She should have thought about noise before. She was surprised they hadn't heard Doppelganger Dumbledore's shriek earlier.

"Good thinking," Severus said from behind her. He was standing by her bed with her towel wrapped around his waist. He looked almost like he belonged there. He also looked like he would keel over any second.

"Let me get you some clean clothing."

"I'll be... right here." He groaned as he sat down on the bed...other than cuts and gashes, there had been bruises, which couldn't be healed with a charm, but with a salve. A salve that Hermione currently did not own.

Hermione crept down the hall to Regulus Black's old room and dug frantically through his old chest to find some sort of thing that resembled pyjamas. She found a pair of moth-eaten flannels that may have once been green, and Scourgified them thrice. They would nearly be matching...she with her blue flannels, top and bottom, and he with his greying green bottoms. She shook her head at the thought and rushed back to her room, breaking through her wards easily and replacing them when she was on the other side.

She turned to find him curled up in her bed, the sheet tucked under his left arm and her towel left abandoned on the dusty carpet near her bed stand. Chuckling softly, she approached the bed and sat on the edge, looking down at his face as he dozed. His drying hair had fallen into his eyes and Hermione reached out to tuck it behind his ear. She couldn't help herself...it was so soft and he looked like he hadn't received any kindness in so long that she continued to stroke his hair as his slow breathing caressed her wrist. When she switched the rhythm of her strokes just a bit, his eyes fluttered open and he drew his hand up to hers.

"Will you lie with me?" he asked, his voice rough, betraying his exhaustion and a bit of embarrassment.

Without preamble, she did just so, lying down with him and turning her body to face him, letting him nestle into her shoulder. She tucked her left arm under her ear and watched him again as he closed his eyes, hoping he would not regret it in the morning.

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He woke them half an hour later from a rather violent nightmare, where he had been whimpering and clutching his caretaker to him as if she were his only chance of survival. Hermione shushed and cooed into his ear as he panted with fear, wishing his pain away. As he slowly but surely calmed to her, she hummed a little lullaby to put him at ease, kissing his temple and stroking his hair, again, as he fell back into a fitful sleep.

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Hermione awoke the next morning to find him clutching her to him again, both having readjusted themselves during the night so her right leg was slung over his waist and her other was situated in between his legs, only a sheet separating him from the denim of her jeans. She sighed, surprisingly content, and stretched her neck to see his face.

"Hmmm, you smell like oranges." His gravelly voice made her jump, as she had thought him, with his relaxed facial features, asleep.

"Oh, damn," she muttered. "It's my jumper. I spilled my tea when you came in last night."

"The smell is not unpleasant, but it is rather sticky, your chest."

"Well, I'll go change then, if it bothers you so..." The man would not budge. His arms were wrapped around her in a fierce embrace. She gave up the struggle after a few pushes at his shoulders, flopping back down into the pillows. "Stubborn arse," she growled in defeat, and he chuckled.

"You are far too comfortable to give up so soon," he mumbled into her neck, sending shivers down her spine. So easily could he kiss her, there.

They lay in silence for a while, the blue-grey light filtering in from the tall windows on either side of her bed, until Hermione's curiosity got the better of her. "What happened last night, Severus?" she asked to the room.

"I do not wish to talk about it. It's best that you know as little about my situation as possible."

"Not what they are doing...what did they do to you? Why were you so hurt?"

"What time is it?" he asked, disentangling himself properly to get up. It looked to be seven in the morning. A glance at her watch confirmed that it was 7:18.

"You'll have to go, soon," Hermione said unenthusiastically, propping herself up on her elbow. "Ron can sleep forever, but Harry wakes up around eight."

He nodded to himself, his brow furrowing. "I should go, now."

"No, don't go out there, again!" She reached out to lay a worried hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged her off.

"Don't be stupid, woman."

"Do you have to leave so soon? We can go downstairs and have some tea..."

"Hermione, I need my clothing," he snapped harshly as he swung his legs over the other side of the bed, the white sheet falling to his waist.

"Yes, sir." She had responded automatically, due to his tone, and found herself rushing over to the radiator to get his robes from the night before. She obediently handed him his clothing, and he strode to the loo with the sheets wrapped conservatively around his middle, leaving her alone in her bedroom, feeling a bit pathetic and bereft. It had felt so right, the two of them a moment ago. Next thing you know, Hermione's eyes were tearing up and her arms were wrapped around her shoulders.

A few minutes later found Hermione staring blankly at the carpet, feeling suddenly lost. There had been something there. Caring for him... it had felt good.

She jumped at the feeling of fingers on her jaw, and was startled to find a fully clad Snape looking down at her, the anger wiped from his face. He brushed some unruly curls out of her eyes and behind her ear and sat next to her on the bed. He held her upper arm loosely and was rubbing distracting circles with his thumb as she studied his features, comparing the softened ones with the harsh lines she had always associated with him.

"Are you on our side, Severus?" she asked tentatively.

The man took a lengthy pause and exhaled slowly. "Trust your instincts, Hermione."

She wasn't entirely sure what that meant, but it meant something better than a 'no'.

"I must go," he murmured, then after an indecisive moment, leaned forward to place a kiss on her lips, lingering there as her eyes fluttered closed. "Thank you," he whispered into her lips, then withdrew.

"Promise you'll be here when everything's over." Hermione grabbed his sleeve. "I don't want all my hard work to have gone to waste," she smiled half-heartedly, but he did not smile in return.

"I cannot make any promises," he said.

"... I know." She let go of him, reluctantly.

He stood up and walked to the door, Disillusioning himself as he opened it.

"Remember me," a disembodied voice said, and then Severus Snape was gone.

A/N: *The tune that I envisioned Hermione humming is a song by Enya called "Marble Halls." It's a very pretty waltz, and it would put me to sleep anytime. The lyrics are nice, too, but they're not particularly companionable with this fic. You'll find the song on iTunes, if you feel like looking it up.*

Thanks for reading! Any concrit or just plain praise will be greedily eaten up!;-)