

Between the Lines

by shefa

Two hands, one book.

One-shot

Chapter 1 of 1

Two hands, one book.

The air in the nearly empty library shook with the sudden sound of his voice, and the bundle of ginger fur in the corner of the room lifted a disgruntled head to investigate.

"Unhand that book, Miss Granger!" growled Snape as he reached across the table for the grimoire clutched securely in Hermione's grasp.

"Absolutely not!" Hermione's cheeks flushed, and her eyes flashed with exasperation. "I've told you, until you learn to address me properly, we have nothing to discuss."

Pausing for breath, Hermione Granger, not-so-recently-appointed professor of Transfiguration, had the appearance of one who might, had circumstances been different and her status not been so recently impugned, have stamped her foot for emphasis.

"And besides," she continued as he made to interrupt, "I happen to *need* this reference. You can wait your turn." She smirked, studiously ignoring his murderous glare. "I'll be sure to let Madam Pince know that you want it when I'm finished."

So, there they sat in the fading light of the cavernous library at Hogwarts, the object in question...one moderately impressive-looking, leather-bound tome...clutched doggedly between them.

Neither one of them showed the slightest sign of relenting.

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The half-kneazle curled on his cushion under the arched window and watched his mistress spar with her wizard. He did so love how her fur puffed out when she was angry; it increased its entertainment value tenfold. This was convenient as he planned to wind his paws in that bramble later, after his mistress scooped him up and returned them to their chambers for the evening. It was amusing to watch the dark wizard snarl at his witch, as if any self-respecting cat couldn't see the wistful gleam in his eye, the silent hope that she would take up the gauntlet to play. In the meantime, there was plenty of action right here to keep him occupied for what was shaping up to be a good, long time.

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If he thought for one moment that glowering in her direction would intimidate her, he was sadly mistaken. Young she might be, but Professor Granger was not about to roll over for Professor Snape. At least not in the way he was demanding at the moment.

She might, however, if he asked nicely, consider lying down *with* him, she thought. In fact, of late, she'd been distracted at the most inconvenient times by an elaborate fantasy of the dark wizard lying alongside her, no glower in sight, his elegant fingers stroking the line of her jaw, his sensual lips against the shell of her ear murmuring words of...

"Miss Granger, would you pay attention!"

Rudely yanked from her daydream, Hermione turned on him again in an instant.

"It's Professor Granger, you stubborn git! And I have as much right as you do to use the books in this library, and no looming, brooding, snapping excuse for a... a *colleague* is going to stop me."

She had a brief moment of satisfaction as he raised his eyebrow; looming and snapping paused for the moment, though she was unsure about the brooding. It had been five years since she'd taken up the Transfiguration post, and her patience at being treated like a subordinate had long worn thin. Her days of deferring to him were over.

"What, precisely, do you need with this particular book, *Professor Granger*?" Snape asked, inflecting her title with a sarcastic sneer. "It's not as if there aren't thousands of volumes like it available that don't contain the profound... weaknesses and obvious... shortcomings of this one."

Hermione snorted impatiently. *Honestly. As if books were any more interchangeable than people.*

"If you must know, I've no interest in being spoon-fed," she said firmly. "This volume contains essential source material, and despite the fact that it is written in Etruscan, I am confident in my ability to master both the language and the contents." She lifted her chin defiantly and was surprised to find him regarding her with keen interest. Her body flushed, and she resisted the urge to squirm.

"I've always appreciated a challenge," she pushed on, determined to ignore the rising heat. "Decoding the contents of a demanding..." she stumbled, distracted by the sensual sweep of his dark lashes, "...text and joining the ranks of the select few who... appreciate and can... erm... fully engage it is... exhilarating." She paused as she let her eyes sweep along the proud line of his jaw. "Don't you agree, Professor?"

He didn't say a word, continuing only to consider her carefully. She wondered for the thousandth time what lurked behind those enigmatic, dark eyes.

"Indeed, Professor Granger," he murmured at last, his voice a silky hum that shot a bolt of fire to her belly.

Shaking herself, desperately resisting the urge to submerge herself in the sight and sound of him, she forced herself to speak again.

"What is so remarkable about this text that you feel you must tussle with me for it, Professor?" She ventured, with a slight tug on the book that they were both still clutching. "As you yourself said, aren't there countless others that would do just as well for *your* needs?"

His gaze sharpened at her question, and in the silent space after her words faded, Hermione felt, inexplicably, breathless.

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The air crackled with energy from the confrontation between witch and wizard, and Crookshanks meowed softly in encouragement.

They were getting closer now, he thought, though the man with the slick, dark fur really was taking surprisingly long to discover the effectiveness of purring for garnering his mistress' affections. It certainly hadn't taken *him* this long to figure out the quickest method to get her to pull him into her arms and stroke him silly.

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She never had been skilled at Occlumency, he thought. She'd tended towards the transparent when she was a child, though as an adult, she'd developed a modicum of opacity. Even so, until tonight, he'd never been tempted to slip behind her eyes.

Despite the fact that for years now he'd felt compelled to circle her like a planet around his sun; despite his certainty that she could never *would* never give him a second glance; despite the hopeless wish that he would be invited in, asked to stay or perhaps because of this he'd stayed emotionally remote and frequently combative. Whom he was protecting, he could not honestly say.

He only knew that he had to hold on to that book. It was the only one that he wanted. He mustn't forget to tell her so.

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"I have great need of this book," he said softly, willing his pounding heart to not leap from his chest. He rubbed the soft leather spine of the awkward tome absently with his thumb. "Despite its deplorable lack of subtlety and often unfathomable language, I find its contents..." the knot in his stomach rose to constrict his throat, "...irresistible."

She nodded thoughtfully, and her cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink. "They are rather, aren't they?" The silk of her whisper flew from her and wrapped itself around him like a cloak. He was captive to her eyes, an eager prisoner. The butterflies that had been twisted tightly in his belly and his throat burst free, flooding his body with shivers.

"What does one do," she shifted her hand slightly so that her skin lightly brushed his...both still clutching the soft leather, "with a book such as this?"

He paused, as if considering a weighty problem...as, he supposed, he was.

"One approaches it with... reverence, and adoration, and... dedication, I should think." He felt his face burn with the memory of countless moments of arrogance and barbed attacks towards her. "And," he moved an elegant finger to stroke a small scratch on the surface of the leather, "should do everything necessary to repair the hurts sustained from previous errors... intentional or by neglect."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I should think that apart from the harm that's already evident, there could also be injury to a book such as this that wouldn't be obvious at first glance." The tenderness in her gaze soothed the fluttering sensation and sent a wave of warmth through him. "Care should always be taken with something so precious." Her voice sounded shy to him, and he looked up sharply to see her eyes on the book, on their hands, lying side by side...nearly touching; the blush that he found exceptionally alluring deepening on her cheeks. "Most importantly, it must be read regularly and carefully so that its contents are not misunderstood or neglected."

She looked up, then, and their eyes locked. Without conscious intent, the hands that had so doggedly clutched the object of bound parchment and leather reached instead for one another, fingers lacing, palm to palm...the rhythms of their heartbeats dancing.

Lost to the satin of her skin and the pounding of his blood, he nearly missed her movement closer and the murmur of her voice at his ear.

"It's getting late; the library is about to close."

He closed his eyes and inhaled the fragrance of her skin and anticipated the flavour of her mouth, if he could muster the courage to lean over *just so* to taste. He opened his eyes, intoxicated by her scent and from anticipation. The lips he longed to taste were merely a breath away. But perhaps she was just warning him that she would take her leave from him now... his heart began to pound again, and the butterflies threatened to burst...

"Severus?" Her voice cut through the sound of blood rushing in his ears. Mutely, he nodded.

"Would you like to walk me to my chambers?" Her voice was small, and it occurred to him that she, too, was nervous.

His answer came as swiftly and surely as lightening across the night sky. Strong hands cupped her jaw, and he brushed her mouth with his, tentative only for a moment, delving deeper as the glory of her welcome swept through him. He rushed in then with lips and tongue and hot breath, fingers winding through the tangle of her curls as he

drank her in like a man long parched.

Her fingers slipped through his hair to stroke his scalp, then slid down to caress the nape of his neck. He shivered at her touch, peripherally aware that the tabletop piled with books was at risk of being toppled.

Really, moving this to her chambers was sounding better and better.

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The fluffy ginger cat shifted again on the unfamiliar cushion, disgruntled that his usual spot for sleep had been overtaken. He supposed that he couldn't blame the witch and wizard who had unceremoniously shooed him from the bed. The tables in the library were hard and sharp-edged even when they weren't piled with books. His mistress and her wizard had been precariously close to knocking those books to the floor, and he knew quite well that was simply not an option for either one of them.

It had been a very long time since he'd seen his mistress move as quickly as she did when she waved her wand to re-shelve her books, and, still hand in hand with the dark wizard, rushed from the library. Distracted momentarily by the sight of curls that were in disarray from hands and not paws, he nearly missed his opportunity for a well-timed *mew!* that saved him from having to traverse the dark halls of the castle by himself so late at night.

But Crookshanks knew that her mind was not on her familiar now. Yes, her fingers had absently stroked his thick fur, but her eyes strayed again and again to the black pelt and sharp features of the wizard who, it seemed, had *finally* learned to purr.

The cat snorted softly. The soft sounds of purring, along with louder, more passionate noises were audible from behind the closed door, but he knew that they were not meant for his ears.

He snuggled into the plush pillow. It would be better this way, he thought, despite being displaced. She had been watching the wizard surreptitiously with sad, wishful eyes for so long, and he, too, watched her hungrily when he thought nobody could see. They had a lot of lost time to make up for, thought the sleepy cat; they were going to be in there for a while.

Laying his head on his paws to sleep, Crookshanks purred as he imagined his mistress' bushy fur and the new pelt that would be available soon for him to explore. The wizard needed to know the rules; claiming his mistress meant taking him on as well. He would get his paws into that dark, shiny fur soon enough. And maybe, if he purred just the right way, the dark wizard would return the favour in kind.

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This story was written for the divine AnnieTalbot for her birthday.

Disclaimer: I am not, alas, JKR.