

Parchment and Silver

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Chapter 1 of 1

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She picked up the gift, smiling her thanks and displaying some sort of anticipation. Oh, my, *whatever* could this heavy, rectangular object be? Oh, look, it's a book, a nice, shiny, new copy! (*Of something I have five copies of...*) Thank you ever so much. You're so thoughtful, and you know me so well! Ha, ha, of course, what *would* I do if I didn't have a book somewhere about? (*What would they do if I decided to have a book burning party?*) Here, let me just put this over here (*on top of all the other books. And quills. And parchment.*) so I can open the next one. Such a small box! Oh, it's ink! (*Like I don't have five gallons from last year.*) Thank you! And no, it will *not* all end up on my fingers! I'll put it here. (*On top of the books. And quills. And parchment. And ink stands. How many of those is a person really supposed to be able to use?*) And now I'll open *this* heavy, rectangular box!

Hermione collapsed on her sofa, completely exhausted by the last few hours of forced jollity. Oh, she knew they meant well, which was why she forced the jollity instead of simply handing the presents back to the givers and telling them to shove off. But *why* could they never give her anything *except* books and quills and ink and suchlike? Yes, she did love books. Yes, she did love research. But nobody ever seemed to notice those moments when, most un-Hermione-like, she admired a set of dress robes, or enjoyed a bit of music, or—Circe forbid—asked where someone had bought their shoes. (Not that she owned very many herself, but what she *did* have was decidedly 'cherce', if anyone bothered to look.) Or even when she picked up a book that was entirely non-academic.

Which was why Christmas and birthdays always left her feeling rather depressed. Who wanted to be repeatedly reminded that every single friend and family member had fit her neatly into a little box (labeled 'nerd') and thereafter stopped paying the least attention to anything she did? (Because it would undoubtedly be 'nerdy' and therefore *bo—ring*.) Sometimes it was exasperating—and sometimes it simply felt like nobody really cared enough to bother. Well, *she* cared, at least. Which was why she'd spent an inordinate amount of money on her present to herself: a beautifully chased silver wand sheath, designed to be hung from her waist. Hermione was tired of stashing the thing in her sleeve, and besides, she'd fallen in love with the sinuous, sensual Art Nouveau design. Never mind that she hadn't been able to afford the belt of silver chain that had accompanied it in the display; she'd find something in her closet that would work. She *did* regret—a little—that she'd not been able to afford the silver overlay they'd offered to match the hilt of her wand to the sheath. Ah, well. Perhaps for Christmas. Or her next birthday. But for now, she was going to be a complete sybarite and bundle herself off into a long, hot bath, complete with chocolate in a myriad of forms and some good music. (No candles, though; she did, after all, wish to occupy herself with—yes, in spite of everything—a book. But it was, at least, an irredeemably frivolous book.) As she made her way to the bathroom, Hermione glanced at the box into which she'd shrunk all of her gifts, then shrugged. No point in mucking about with it now; she was still using parchment from five years ago—and three-year-old ink. And tomorrow morning was early enough to banish it into the attic.

Warmly bundled in comfortable, slightly ratty robe and slippers, Hermione padded into the kitchen to return her mug and a few plates to the sink before turning in for the

night. She was sleepy enough that she'd never have noticed the package on the table except for Crookshanks's miaowing; he'd hopped up on the table and was nudging the box with his nose. Hermione blinked, trying to salvage some sort of coherent thought from her brain. She was quite certain that the box had not been there when she arrived home earlier; she could not possibly have missed a burgundy-wrapped parcel with a neat bow on top in the same colour. And its presence was certainly no mistake, for there was a label fastened to the bow, reading 'To: Hermione Granger' in script just as neat as the wrapping. But how on earth had it ended up on her kitchen table? And who would have sent it? All of her friends and family were certainly accounted for, gift-wise.

Well, the only thing to do would be to open it. But first... Hermione fished her wand out of the pocket of her bathrobe and began casting detection spells. It was not *entirely* unthinkable for her to be sent hexes and curses through the post; there were still people who were jealous of her relationship with the boys or of her fame from the war, or—rather more rarely—thought that a well-placed love potion was just the thing to bag a war hero or make a fool of her. Tiresome, all of it. But the package did not appear to have any offensive (in any sense of the word) magic. And so Hermione, taking careful note of the details, opened it.

She gasped as she drew out the silver chain from its box, each link with its engraved swirls matching her memory of the length in the shop window, the small clasp with its lotus in blue cloisonné. Hermione ran her fingers over the smooth enamel. Who would have thought to give her such a gift? Who would have *known*? She'd only pointed the piece out to Ginny once, when they were walking past on their way to meet up with the boys, and no one knew she'd planned to buy the sheath except for the shop assistant who'd sold it to her. Hermione returned her attention to the box, looking for any hint of the sender, but no evidence remained, if there had been any to begin with. With a sniffle—she hadn't realised she was crying—Hermione rushed to collect the wand sheath and return to her bedroom; she needed to see how this beautiful present looked.

There could be no doubt but that the young woman was glowing, her eyes animated and bright, the dark red robes burnishing the brown-gold of her hair. She favoured a modified late-Victorian style that, though concealing from neck to ankle, lovingly molded her curves before flowing out into a graceful skirt. At her waist, glinting in sharp contrast to the soft wool, was wrapped a silver chain, from which was suspended her wand. Her fingers subconsciously sought out the shape time and again, fiddling with a single link, playing down the length of the sheath. The images that slipped into his mind and the resulting rush of blood made him feel both exhilarated and censorious; he was, after all these years, becoming a perverted old man.

But whatever the effect, it pleased him to see her cheerful and confident as she chatted in the Ministry hallways; he'd noted over the years how low-spirited she became after various holidays—and then he'd noted his own dissatisfaction with the situation. It had taken some time to come to terms with his change of opinion, but he'd used it to furnish a new purpose: Severus Snape wanted to see Hermione Granger smile.

AN: Oh, this has been on my hard drive for a very long time; I wanted to continue it to the normal conclusion of a romance story. But. it. just. won't. cooperate. Anything I tried simply sounded ghastly—maudlin or syrupy and contrived. So, I'm giving in to the inevitable and posting the portion that I *do* like. I hope you've enjoyed it as well. Either way, a token in the little box below is much appreciated. Cheers!