

Merlin's Amulet

by melusin

Three short stories loosely connected by history, pizza and the Statutes of Secrecy.

The Museum

Chapter 1 of 4

Three short stories loosely connected by history, pizza and the Statutes of Secrecy.

A/N; Back in July, I rather rashly offered to write three drabbles for the livejournal community, hpcon_envy. The prompts I was given were: Severus and Hermione go to the movies, Severus and Hermione bump into each other at a museum and Severus and Hermione at the Harry Potter Exhibit in Chicago. This was the result. Needless to say, they evolved into something a bit longer than drabbles.

The first ficlet, The Museum, is for Bambu.

Big thanks, as usual, to Septentrion for the beta.

With closing time fast approaching, Hermione strode purposefully towards the centre of the Victorian brick and glass edifice, otherwise known as the Municipal Museum. The last of the stragglers were making their way towards the exit, occasionally bumping into Hermione as she moved against the flow. The indignant, "Watch where you're goings" were met with mumbled apologies, but Hermione's eyes never left the arrows directing her towards her goal.

The entrance to the Egyptian room was flanked on either side, rather appropriately, by two large statues of Anubis. Hermione barely noticed the jackal-headed guardians as she passed through. Usually, she would have been only too happy to linger amongst the ancient dead, examining their grave-goods and admiring the workmanship on the jewellery and the alabaster Coptic jars; today, however, they held little appeal. This was also true of the Natural History wing, although she did spare a sympathetic glance for a stuffed otter, frozen in time with a rather surprised look on its face. 'I know the feeling,' she muttered, glancing over her shoulder. Someone was following her; she was almost certain of it. Undeterred, she pressed on.

The Dolaucothi Hoard had pride of place in a custom-made vault with doors of gunmetal steel that would slam shut in the event of an attempted burglary, trapping the thief within. The bored attendant sitting on the bench outside looked pointedly at his watch as Hermione paused to read the information panel. She smiled. 'Just a quick look. Won't be a minute.'

Inside, the subdued lighting added a sense of drama to the priceless exhibits in their glass cases. Hermione scanned them hurriedly. If she was right, the trail of breadcrumbs left by her mysterious informant would lead her to the find of the century—if not the millennium. She tried not to get too excited; it could just as easily be some gigantic hoax.

Coins, lots of coins... bracelets... torcs... brooches... No, not here... Hermione turned the corner, feeling the magical pull long before she located its origin. She let it draw her closer, hardly daring to breathe until her nose was almost touching the glass.

'Oh. My. God.'

The amulet on the velvet cushion was labelled: *Gold talisman. Romano-Celtic. Provenance unknown.* To a Muggle, it would have looked like a gold pendant with a large

ruby at the centre—the intricate engravings depicting long forgotten gods and magical beasts merely decoration to the untrained eye. But Hermione saw something else entirely, as any witch or wizard would.

Transfixed, she watched a two-headed dragon rear up from its metallic prison, both mouths opening in silent greeting. The Ogam script dancing around the ruby proclaiming its message to those who could read it only confirmed what Hermione already knew:

Myrddin made me.

'Fucking Hell.'

'Language, Miss Granger.'

The scream died on her lips at the unmistakable feel of a wand pressed between the shoulder blades. '*Snake?* What are you doing...? It was you, wasn't it? All those cryptic messages...'

'You took your time working it out, didn't you?' The voice was weak, raspy. 'It would seem your much vaunted intelligence has been somewhat exaggerated.' He stepped back dropping the wand. 'Don't make a scene,' he whispered. 'There are cameras everywhere.'

Hermione spun around, but there was no one there.

'What was the purpose of this-this *charade?*' she hissed. 'Why not tell the Ministry you'd found Merlin's amulet?'

'Because I need it.'

Hermione's head turned in the direction of the voice, spotting the tell-tale shimmer of a Disillusionment Charm. 'You mean you intend stealing it?' She watched it squeeze between two cabinets, coming to rest in the corner. Only then did she wonder why it could be seen so clearly.

'What are you doing?'

The illusion faded. 'I could hardly appear out of nowhere, now could I?' Severus pointed to the camera above him before stepping out of the shadows. 'This is the only blind spot in the room. And to answer your first question...' He shrugged. 'The amulet would only disappear into the Department of Mysteries never to be seen again if the Ministry got its hands on it. Besides which, my need is greater.'

Hermione's eyes widened in shock. It had been many years since she'd seen her former teacher, and while she'd heard the rumours that he'd never fully recovered from Nagini's bite, she'd taken it all with a pinch of salt. But here was living proof: Snape's robes were hanging loosely on a skeletal frame, his skin almost translucent. The white dressing on his neck, standing out in stark contrast to his customary black attire, made her shudder.

'Are you all right?' Hermione asked. 'You look terrible.'

'No, Miss Granger, I am not.' Severus held out a shaky hand. 'Which is why I require the healing powers of that amulet.'

'So why haven't you taken it?' Hermione asked. 'Why involve me in all this?'

'Because my magic is virtually non-existent,' he spat. 'As you saw, my Disillusionment Charm would barely fool a Muggle. And I can't Apparate. I'd be stuck here if I tried to break the glass.'

'I'm so sorry. I didn't know...'

'I don't want your pity—' Severus clutched his throat and started coughing violently. 'I don't have much time. Will-will you... help me?'

How could she not? After all, he wouldn't be here in this dreadful state if they hadn't left him for dead in the Shrieking Shack all those years ago. Hermione sighed. 'Of course I will. What do you want me to do?'

It didn't take Hermione long to Transfigure one of the buttons from her jacket into a replica of Merlin's amulet. Under her own, flawless, Disillusionment Charm, she was just about ready to make the switch when the Museum attendant came looking for her.

'Time to go home, miss...' He stared at Severus in confusion. 'Where's the girl? Where did you spring from?'

Hermione did the first thing that came into her head. She set off the fire alarm.

~ * ~

Leaning against the wall near the service entrance, Severus tried to gather what was left of his dignity. 'Are you trying to kill me?' he panted, shivering with cold.

'I didn't think about the sprinklers,' Hermione admitted, wringing her hair out. She glanced around the narrow alleyway, withdrawing her wand once she was sure they weren't being observed. 'Shall I do the honours?'

'Don't point that thing at me,' he snarled, although his teeth were starting to chatter. 'Give me the damned amulet.'

Sighing, Hermione took it out of her pocket, staring in wonder at it momentarily before unclasping the chain. 'Here, let me help you.'

Severus didn't object as Hermione fastened the ancient artefact around his neck. She watched his face closely for any changes. 'Is it working? Do you feel any better?'

'I feel... feel...'

Helplessly, Hermione watched Severus slide to the ground. She crouched down beside him, gently sliding an arm around his waist. 'I'll take that as a no, then.'

Moving Pictures

Chapter 2 of 4

Three short stories loosely connected by history, pizza and the Statutes of Secrecy.

A/N: The second prompt: Severus and Hermione go to the movies. (Eventually).

For aleysiasnape.

Thanks as ever to Septentrion for the beta.

The snake was talking again. Severus tried to move away from the hissing serpent, but the bear held him firmly in his paws. Others came and went: Alligator nipped his toes while Crow picked at his left arm. Some, like Lion, merely observed the proceedings but said nothing.

His eyelids were heavy. So, so tired... Why wouldn't they just let him sleep?

'Listen. You must listen...'

~ * ~

Dicto-Quill at the ready, Hermione opened her notebook. Since Apparating a barely conscious Snape to St Mungo's, she had remained at his bedside, observing his pitiful condition with a professional detachment. He had yet to show much sign of improvement.

Sighing, Hermione resigned herself to several more hours of tedium. 'Please, Snape, wake up. Wake up so I can go home.'

Their dramatic entrance into the reception area three days previously had naturally caused quite a stir...the Healers, once they had recognised who he was, had descended on Severus like a flock of green-robed vultures, ready to make a last ditch attempt to save his life. Levitating him to an examination cubicle, they had made short work of his soaking wet clothing. Hermione, following behind, yelling, 'Don't touch the amulet,' had seen more of her former professor than she had ever wanted to, but his pale, horribly scarred and emaciated body had shocked her to the core, evoking a deep sense of compassion for the man.

'Hands off!' The Healer-in-charge had been a whirl of bustling professionalism. Turning to Hermione, she'd demanded, 'How long's he been wearing this?'

Without removing her eyes from Severus' still form, Hermione had told her.

'And I suppose he expected a miraculous recovery?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Well...' The Healer had not looked hopeful. 'It could just as easily have killed him. His magical energy is so low, he still might not be strong enough to endure its power. I'm afraid all we can do, now, is wait and see...'

Convinced they had done all they could, the nursing staff had made Severus as comfortable as possible and left him to his fate...and Hermione's observations...

'Day 3: slight improvement in skin colour. Eyes appear less sunken...' Hermione paused, mesmerised by the amulet, yet again. The ruby at the centre was pulsing with Snape's heartbeat, bathing his chest in a red light. *'Creature activity continues...'* She smiled as a porpoise rose in a graceful arc. *'Light: consistent...'* Severus' body gave one of its sporadic twitches; Hermione noted the time. *'Breathing shallow but even...'*

A medi-witch stuck her head round the door. 'Any change?'

'Fraid not.' She moved from her position by the bed, allowing the young woman access to her patient. Hermione watched her perform the routine scans and change the dressing on his neck wound but turned away before she removed the sheet from Severus' unresponsive body, giving her charge some privacy.

'All done. Clean as a whistle.'

'Thank you.' With a sigh, Hermione looked at her watch. Another hour before the Auror arrived to give her a break. How much longer could Snape go on like this?

~ * ~

Badger spelled out the situation: 'Listen to Serpent or die.'

A shadowy figure, hovering beyond his animal companions, was beckoning.

'Choose.'

~ * ~

Hermione's head jerked. *I must have dozed off.* She blinked before sucking in a breath. The pulsating rhythm of the stone had stopped; a pale, rosy glow was suffusing Snape's skin...or as much as the sheet, which was covering him from the waist down, allowed her to establish, at any rate.

Leaning over him, Hermione's eyes scanned his body before carefully peeking under his bandages. 'I don't believe it.' The seeping wound left by Nagini's bite had completely healed...as had every scar on his torso. Gently taking his hand, Hermione turned his left forearm. The faint remnant of his Dark Mark was also missing. 'Impossible...' she whispered. 'Impossible.'

'How... touching.'

She dropped his hand as if it were on fire. Dark eyes were regarding her with suspicion. 'I expected you'd have the common decency to get me to hospital,' Severus said, 'but I did not expect you to keep vigil at my bedside.'

'Don't flatter yourself,' Hermione snapped, pointing towards the amulet. 'Kingsley ordered me not to let it out of my sight. I'll fetch the Healer.'

Glancing in the direction of her finger, Severus's eyes widened in horror. He grabbed the sheet, pulling it up to his neck. 'Sit,' he ordered. 'Why did you have to go and involve the Minister in this?'

Hermione sat. 'It was more than my job's worth not to,' she protested.

'Interfering little do-good...'

'Look,' she said tersely, 'the Healers recognised the amulet immediately. If I hadn't said anything, word would still have got back to Kingsley, and then I'd really have been in the shit. And now you've recovered...'

'You can't have it,' Severus said, covering the amulet with his hand protectively. 'Not yet, anyway. They said...'

'Who?'

'The... er, animals,' he replied, glaring at her. 'Make of that what you will.'

'Interesting...'. Frowning, Hermione made a note to question him further on the subject. 'O-kay, you can keep it until you're completely healed. But I have orders that once you can walk, you're to accompany me to the Ministry.'

'What? Why?'

'Research.' She grinned. 'You, me and the amulet are going to be disappearing into the Department of Mysteries for a while. Call it service to the community for trying to steal a priceless artefact.'

Severus groaned, covering his face with his hands. 'You're an Unspeakable, aren't you?'

Laughing, Hermione stood to call the Healer. 'Now, you don't seriously expect me to answer that, do you?'

~ *** ~

Hermione cast a nervous glance in Severus' direction. In retrospect, it probably wasn't one of her better ideas. His face was like thunder.

Oh, dear. 'I'm so sorry,' Hermione said. 'I had no idea it would be like that.'

If anything, his expression darkened. 'Really.'

Following months of extensive tests, Merlin's amulet had at last been pronounced safe for the treatment of the severely spell damaged, and a tentative friendship between two unlikely people had been established in the process. And it was just that: friendship. Nothing more. Reminding herself of this each day had become routine for Hermione...as had assiduously ignoring the odd flutter of butterfly wings when Severus quirked a lop-sided smile at her filing system or the little shiver down the spine when his hand accidentally brushed hers. So, after all their hard work, it had seemed only natural to suggest an evening out...a couple of drinks and some old classic film at the local Arts Centre...to celebrate the success of their collaboration. But now it looked like their fledgling relationship was in tatters.

'I could kill my father,' she muttered, as they emerged from the cinema. 'If I'd known, I'd never have suggested it.'

'What's he got to do with it?' Severus asked, his brow furrowing ever more deeply.

'He's been going on about the cinematography in the 'Seventh Seal' for as long as I can remember,' Hermione replied. 'How was I to know it was about a man playing chess with death in order to stay alive? As if you needed to be reminded...'

'While I could sympathise with the protagonist's predicament, somewhat,' Severus interrupted, 'that was not the reason for my anger.'

'Then what was?'

'Hermione...'. He sighed. 'The last time I accompanied a young lady to the cinema, I was just about able to afford a choc ice at the interval. There was none of that... popcorn, hot dogs and Merlin knows what else...and *chatting* during the picture was most certainly not to be tolerated. Any more rustling of sweet wrappers from that woman in front of us, and I swear I would have hexed...'

'Oh, Severus,' Hermione said, laughing. 'It was you, wasn't it? The exploding popcorn bucket?'

He smirked. 'She deserved it. However, I apologise for ruining our date.'

Date? Hermione was sure she must be as red as a beetroot. 'I...er, that's okay, Severus, really. I'm glad you didn't think I was making fun of you, or anything, but cinemas are like that nowadays, I'm afraid.'

'A pity,' Severus said, offering her his arm, 'since I enjoy a good film, but nothing could persuade me to repeat that experience, however... amenable the company.'

'Oh...um.' The butterflies were back. A whole flock of them, clamouring for her to seize the moment. 'Well, if you like, we could raid Dad's DVD collection...' She let the implications hang in the air a moment. 'Do you have a DVD player?'

'Naturally.'

'Good. I'll bring the pizza.'

Exhibition

Chapter 3 of 4

Three short stories loosely connected by history, pizza and the Statutes of Secrecy.

A/N:The third prompt: Hermione and Severus at the Harry Potter exhibit in Chicago. I've not seen the exhibition, so I was very grateful for the kind help of geminiscorp, machshefa and lulabelle who all have. I also cribbed off the Leaky Cauldron's report for the order in which the exhibition appears.

For lynelucas.

Many thanks as ever to septentrion for the beta and to sylvanawood for some much needed cheerleading.

For once, the bathroom mirror remained silent as it contemplated its owner shaving...the old-fashioned way, with his father's cut-throat razor at five o'clock in the afternoon...a fact for which Severus was profoundly grateful.

He tilted his head, stretching the skin on his neck. It was still new, this lack of pain, the absence of a wound that refused to heal. Gingerly, he scraped away his day's growth of beard. A pleasure, now, shaving. Something to be appreciated, not hurried. Not even today when... He grinned at his reflection, having something to smile about for a change.

Severus Snape had a girlfriend, and he was meeting her in an hour.

'Who'd have thought it, eh?' He dipped the razor in the hot water and shook it. It seemed there was hope for him yet.

And not just any old girlfriend, either. Hermione Granger. No one in their right mind would call her run of the mill. She was good looking, intelligent, witty...the sort of witch capable of minding your back in a wand fight should the need arise. And an Unspeakable to boot, whose meteoric rise through the ranks was causing something of a stir in the higher echelons of society. Impatient to get to the top, the indomitable Miss Granger was cutting a swathe through the Department of Mysteries with her high-handed reforms, discarding long established procedures and traditions along the way fast enough to make any pure-blood politician tremble in his handmade Italian shoes. But she had Kingsley's ear and was the Saviour of the Wizarding world's best friend. Not only Unspeakable but Untouchable. Oh, yes, Hermione Granger was top totty, all right, with many an eligible wizard vying for her attention. And yet, for reasons still unknown, she seemed to have chosen him.

Pinching his nose, Severus brought the blade to his top lip and paused, giving the matter some thought, before continuing. Perhaps it was because he'd taken the trouble to look past the Erumpent-hidden facade she put on at work? Maybe he was the only one who noticed the straightening of the shoulders every time some low-ranking official called her a hard-nosed bitch within earshot? Or maybe it was because he recognised that, inside that shell, she was still the same, insecure little Muggle-born swot he remembered waving her hand around in his classroom, desperate to gain his attention, determined to make her mark in an alien world that treated her kind with suspicion. The fact she hadn't stopped in her struggle to be recognised, and to prove she was as good as the next witch, was only a credit to her fortitude.

Severus rinsed the soap residue from his face and grabbed a towel, wondering what the afternoon and, hopefully, the night would bring. This would be their third date, and this time, it was he who had chosen the venue. The second one, while it had ended most satisfactorily, had got off to a shaky start.

'Do you have a DVD player?'

'Naturally.'

He'd lied, of course, sooner than admit he had no idea what Hermione was talking about.

There had followed a rather frustrating morning in a depressing out of town industrial estate, firstly trying to identify said contraption and subsequently purchasing one...together with a state-of-the-art television set. In the process, a spotty-faced youth, bearing the name-tag "Darren" (presumably so he wouldn't forget) came within a Kneazle's whisker of being hexed for his impertinence. Unfortunately, despite his Herculean effort, when Hermione had arrived and he'd switched it on, the ancient electricity supply at Spinner's End, which he hardly ever used, had refused to co-operate and set fire to the fuse board instead.

So much for 'The Ladykillers.'

Then there was the takeaway 'pizza' she'd brought with her, if that's what you could call it. Severus shuddered at the memory. There was probably more taste and nutritional value in the cardboard box it had arrived in, and he'd told her as much, which hadn't gone down at all well. He smirked at the mirror before healing a small cut near his ear; he'd found some inventive things to do with the olives afterwards, though, which had gone a long way to salvaging the evening.

Severus was still smiling a few minutes later when he was putting on his shirt. It was very strange this... lightness of being. It took some getting used to; he had, after all, lived in a state of almost permanent melancholia for most of his adult life. It was not unwelcome, however. And it was the amulet he had to thank for this improvement to his temperament.

The animals, in their wisdom, had made it quite clear: all or nothing. Physical healing could only be accomplished if his mental and emotional state was given equal consideration. And so, one by one, they had made him face his worst fears and stripped away years of mental anguish and guilt. The last had been the most difficult to deal with: Unicorn's purity of spirit was almost unbearable to behold, and he'd tried to shrink away, afraid that the darkness within could only taint such a beautiful creature. But the mare had been insistent in her pursuit, finally bowing her head and touching her horn to Severus' heart.

He'd wept then, for the mistakes of his youth and the life he should have lived, eventually waking up on the floor of Hermione's office, red-eyed and embarrassed. She had handed him a box of tissues but made no comment.

'It is over,' he said, removing the amulet from around his neck. 'Take it. I never want to see it again.'

'Thank you for all your help, Severus.' Hermione walked to her desk and pulled out a bottle of firewhisky and two glasses from the bottom drawer. 'Drink? You look like you need one.'

And somehow he knew that life was about to get a whole lot better...

~ ~HGSS~ ~

Hermione was waiting for him in the Leaky Cauldron at six as arranged, looking rather fetching in her Muggle clothing. She held out a beer mat. 'International Portkey to Chicago as requested, activating in fifteen minutes so we have time for a drink first. I had to call in a few favours for this.' She grinned. 'I'm expecting something special, Severus.'

'Then I trust I shall not disappoint you, Hermione...'

~ ~HGSS~ ~

Hermione stared at the sign on the door in disbelief.

Closed for refurbishment.

'You brought me all this way for a pizza?'

'Yes, I...'

'To a restaurant that isn't going to re-open for another week?'

'I thought you liked Italian...' Severus sighed resignedly. He should have taken the time to make a reservation, but the friendly staff had always managed to squeeze him in somewhere in this, one of his favourite, out of the way restaurants in the Americas. Just his luck, really. He'd been hoping that this little family run establishment would have woven some of its Neapolitan magic and shown Hermione what a real pizza should taste like, thus providing a romantic prelude to what he hoped would turn into a night of frenzied passion. By the expression on her face, however, he'd blown any chance of that right out of the water.

'I'm sorry...' He trailed off. Hermione was staring past his shoulder, mouth open in horror.

'What the hell...?' She lifted a shaky arm and pointed. 'Severus, look.'

He turned around just in time to see a bus turning a corner.

'Did you see that?' Hermione asked.

Nodding, Severus kept his eyes fixed on the disappearing bus. 'Yes.'

"'Harry Potter: The Exhibition'?" she almost shrieked. 'What, in Merlin's name, *isthat*?'

'I've no idea,' he replied, taking her arm. 'Now, shall we try and find somewhere else to eat?'

'How can you even think of food...?' Hermione regarded him suspiciously, her Unspeakable antennae twitching. 'Severus Snape. If you know anything about this, anything at all, you'd better tell me. Immediately.'

~~HGSS~~

It took Hermione and Severus an hour to discover the location of the exhibition and to subsequently find the Museum of Science and Industry. 'This is becoming a habit,' Hermione muttered as she and Severus wove their way through a group of excitable Muggle women in what appeared to be fancy dress. They started nudging each other and staring at them...or rather, at Severus.

She glanced around warily as they descended the stairs. 'How peculiar...'

Severus merely shrugged.

There were still a lot of people milling about even though it was early evening. Fortunately for them, the opening hours had been extended, and so there was no need to break in. That would have been the least of their worries, though, Hermione thought, more concerned with the logistics of a mass Obliviate as she walked around the exhibition space, unable to grasp the enormity of the secrecy breach. The set of the Gryffindor Common room was eerily true to life. Could a Gryffindor be responsible? It didn't bear thinking about. And what involvement, if any, did Severus have in all this? He may have been a spy all those years, but despite the poker face, his flat denial hadn't rung true, somehow.

Following behind, Severus kept his face impassive while his mind raced.*It was a mistake to bring her here. I should've known something like this might happen.*

'Who could have done this?' Hermione asked, pulling him out of his thoughts. 'They even know about Quidditch!'

'Who indeed?' Severus hesitated before putting a hand on her shoulder. 'Shall we leave, now?'

'Oh, no. I want to see *everything*!'

'Very well. I believe the next exhibit is through there...'

~ * ~

'So... ' Hermione's eyes swept around the Divination Classroom, taking it all in. 'Sybill Trelawney seems well represented... Do you think it could have been her?'

'I hardly think that's likely. Sybill may be deluded, but she's no law breaker.' Severus smirked and nodded at a group of Muggles, who were taking it in turns to stare into a teacup. Unconsciously, he slipped his arm around Hermione's waist, and much to his relief, she reciprocated. Drawing her in closer, Severus took a moment to relish the feel of her pressed against him. Sybill could have gazed in her crystal ball for all eternity and never envisaged this piece of good fortune.

'What do you think those two can see with their inner eyes?' he whispered.

His breath on her ear was just so... Hermione snorted. 'Such rubbish. Realistic, but rubbish, nevertheless.'

Severus smirked. 'You're reading my mind. Seen enough?'

'No.'

They turned the corner...

What the fuck?

... and found themselves in the Potions classroom.

~ * ~

They could only stare in amazement.

A woman in front of them let out a long sigh. 'It's just how I imagined it in the books.'

'Books?' Hermione mouthed to Severus, letting her arm fall. She stepped away to take a closer look.

'I'm not so sure...', the woman's friend replied. 'But look! Snape's costume!'

'Oh, look at all those *buttons*! It's *fabulous*!'

Severus stared, his eyebrows almost reaching his hairline.*A frock coat? Were they mad?*

'Yeah. If only the Potions master were really here...'

They sighed in unison. 'Yeah.'

Filled with indignation, Severus turned to Hermione for support, only to find she had her hand stuffed in her mouth. 'Shall we continue?' he asked.

Coughing, she replied, 'One minute, I want to find out more about those books. Excuse me ladies...'

Severus could feel a headache coming on.

~ * ~

A few exhibits later, somewhere between the greenhouses and the Quidditch display, a thought struck Hermione. 'Have you noticed something?' she asked.

Severus smiled as he spotted Hagrid's Hut. 'I've noticed a lot of things, Hermione. Could you be a little more specific?'

'Well...' She gestured around her with a broad sweep of her arm. 'These, er, sets are pretty accurate for the most part, and some of the... props, uncannily so. But the costumes...' Hermione made a face.

'Quite. They are consistently bizarre.' That get-up Lockhart was supposed to have worn had given them both a much needed laugh; it had almost made up for the frock coat. 'It would seem these Muggles have a very peculiar idea of wizarding dress.'

'Yes. I wonder why. Artistic licence? Perhaps robes are too drab and boring? She shrugged. 'Come on. There can't be much more to go... Ooh, look! The Forbidden Forest! Now what do you think they have in store for us through those arches...?'

~ * ~

'Merlin! Severus sucked in a breath, the room devoted to the Dark Arts and the Death Eaters taking him by surprise, although he recovered quickly. 'Look at those ripped excuses for robes,' he whispered. 'Can you imagine Lucius ever joining Voldemort's ranks if he'd been expected to wear that outfit?'

'No,' Hermione replied, shuddering, 'I can't. But I've seen enough, now. This place is giving me the creeps.' *And that Dementor is way too realistic*, she thought, increasing her pace as she led the way towards a familiar set of double doors. On the other side, as expected, she found herself in the Great Hall.

Still trying to digest everything they'd seen, Severus dropped back. He'd have to tell her *something*, but how much? What was relevant? Lost in thought, he had to stop abruptly to avert a collision with Hermione, who was staring, arms folded, at yet another display of elaborate costumes.

'Pink,' she said weakly. 'With *my* complexion?'

'What?'

'That... *dress*. I'm supposed to have worn it to the Yule Ball, apparently.'

She was looking at him expectantly. What was he supposed to say? He knew nothing about formal gowns. 'Oh. I see... It's a bit on the small side, isn't it?'

Evidently, not that.

'Are you saying I'm fat?' she snapped.

'No, of course not,' Severus said hurriedly. 'That actress is, ah, smaller than you, that's all.'

Hermione's eyes were blazing. 'She's nothing like me. Did you see the hair? How straight it is...?' Narrowing her eyes, she scowled at him. 'You'd prefer it like that though, I bet. Pity it isn't red.'

'What? That was totally uncalled for.' Sighing, Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. With all of his carefully laid plans for the evening in tatters, it was time to concede defeat. 'This has been a trying evening for both of us, Hermione. I think it's high time we went home.'

~~HGSS~

'Did you see the chap playing me?' Severus asked as they left the building, more to bridge the awkward silence that had grown between them anything else. 'Nothing like me, at all.'

'Hmm...,' Hermione replied. 'He's a bit old, isn't he? But he's definitely got... something...'

Severus stopped and gaped at her. 'Don't tell me you fancy *him*?'

Hermione smirked. 'Had you going there for a minute, didn't I?' She sighed when he didn't smile back. 'Look... I'm sorry I overreacted earlier...really, I am...but it was just the final straw...' She reached for his hand. 'Am I forgiven?'

'There is nothing to forgive.' He gave her hand a squeeze. 'You had a nasty shock, after all.'

'You can say that again.' Stepping closer, Hermione stroked his cheek with her free hand. 'Severus, I don't know what's been going on here, and I do intend to investigate this, but we're supposed to be on a date. Now. There's a good Indian restaurant near my flat. What say we get a takeaway, hm?' She stood up on tip-toes and kissed him gently. 'Hm? Plan B. What do you think?'

And Severus had to agree it was a very good back-up plan, indeed. Clever witch.

A very cracky conclusion will follow:)

Conclusion

Chapter 4 of 4

In which Severus confesses all.

A/N: My conclusion to wrap up the prompts. Warning: Extreme silliness ahead.

For sylvanawood, who puts up with my whinging and keeps me going when I'm ready to throw in the towel.

Thanks, as ever, to Septentrion for the beta.

Hermione had always liked wrestling with a good mystery, but only when she could eventually solve it, and this one was proving impossible to get a handle on. Huffing a stray curl out of the way, she smoothed out the parchment in front of her, wondering how best to phrase the letter so it would cause the least offence.

Having spent a fruitless day trudging around some of the biggest book shops in Muggle London...as well as some of the smaller, specialist establishments...she had been unable to find a trace of the elusive 'Harry Potter' books. 'You can buy them anywhere,' the lady in Chicago had replied politely to her enquiry. Her friend had stared at her

as if she were a creature from another planet.

'Not in London, you can't,' Hermione muttered, dipping her quill into the inkwell. It made no sense, but if there were an explanation, she'd bet her Order of Merlin that Severus knew more than he was letting on. He'd been terribly evasive, changing the subject each time she brought it up, trying to distract her with his kisses, and...

'Yes, you're an expert in diversionary tactics, Severus Snape. I'll give you that.' She grinned and began to write:

Dear Severus,

How's your week going? Mine is proving increasingly frustrating since I can't get that stupid exhibition out of my head. I've tried unsuccessfully to get my hands on those books. No one seems to have ever heard of Harry Potter, despite what they said in Chicago, which is perhaps something of a relief. However, I work in the Department of Mysteries for a reason, and I have a horrible feeling that there might be some Dark forces at work here. Is there anything, anything at all, you can think of that might shed some light on this? I'd really appreciate your help as I'm at my wits end and don't know where to turn.

Looking forward to seeing you on Saturday. Can't wait to try your cooking. Shall I bring some wine?

Yours,

Hermione.

There, she thought, spelling the ink dry. That should do the trick. I appealed to his better nature to come clean and managed not to call him a liar in the process.

Her office owl hooted, flapping its wings as she attached the parchment to its leg. 'Off you go, Aristotle, and don't take any crap from him. Remember, you're on official business; he can't refuse to let you in...'

~ * ~

Severus' response came by return owl:

Week progressing as usual. Slowly.

I will get hold of those damned books for you. Expect a parcel owl tomorrow.

Wine is always welcome, as are you.

Yours,

Severus

~~HGSS~~

Severus gathered the dough mixture together with his hands, kneading it into a smooth ball. The problem with Hermione, he thought, flouring the work surface, was that she was like a terrier with a rat once she got her teeth into something, and no amount of prevaricating was going to shake her off the scent. Soon, she would know everything, and then... Sighing, he started to roll out his pizza base. Why did all his relationships with women have to be so bloody *complicated*.

~ * ~

The cooking was well underway, wafting mouth-watering smells into the living room of Spinner's End as Severus laid the table. 'I do hope she's hungry,' he muttered, polishing his best wine glasses. This way, at least, he could be sure they'd be having something edible for dinner which would taste good and not give him heartburn afterwards...like that curry had.

Punctual as ever, Hermione arrived on the stroke of seven. She smiled wearily and pecked him on the cheek. 'Wine,' she said, thrusting a bottle into his hands.

'Thank you.' Severus looked her up and down appreciatively. She'd taken the trouble to dress nicely and apply some make-up, but it hadn't disguised the bags under her eyes. 'Are you all right?' he asked. 'You look... tired.'

Hermione nodded, and tapped her pocket. 'Been reading...'

'Ah. The, er... books.'

'Yes. The, er... books.' Hermione sighed. 'I've hardly slept. My life up until the Battle of Hogwarts is in there, and... Severus, I scoured most of central London unsuccessfully. How on earth did you manage to find them?'

Severus' response was to gather her into a one armed hug and kiss her soundly. 'Dinner first, and then I will tell you all I can...'

~ * ~

'This is the best pizza I've ever tasted,' Hermione said between munches.

Severus inclined his head, obviously pleased. 'I'm glad you think so,' he said, helping himself to some salad. 'I always find that good ingredients simply prepared make the best meals.'

'Mmm... I'll say. May I have more wine?'

'And...' Severus said, refilling her glass '... I've made Tiramisu for afters...so leave some room for it.'

'No problem...' Hermione's eyes drifted to the little pile of olives on the side of Severus' plate. 'Don't you like them?'

'Saving them for... later,' he replied.

'Oh...' Blushing, Hermione reached for her wineglass to cover her embarrassment. 'I see.' He was trying to divert her attention again, she was sure of it, reminding her of that thing he'd done with the olives the night the fuse board had caught fire, but he wasn't going to get his way this time, oh no. 'Stop trying to distract me, you sneaky Slytherin. There'll be no nookie for you until you tell me what's going on...'

~ * ~

Sated, if not stuffed, Hermione flopped down on the sofa, accepting Severus' offer of coffee with a tired, 'thank you.' He placed the small tray beside her, took a cup for himself and sat down opposite in the armchair closest to the fire. Hermione was looking at him expectantly.

'Before we get to the books,' Severus began, 'I must tell you something of my past for any of this to make some kind of sense.' He closed his eyes as painful memories

rose, unbidden, to the front of his mind. But, thanks to the effect the amulet had had on his emotions, he was able to view them objectively, almost as if they had happened to someone else. 'And I have to tell you that I do not possess all the answers.' He took a sip of coffee. 'I suppose I need to go back to when... Voldemort was... defeated, the first time around...'

'Go on,' Hermione said.

'You know, of course, that Dumbledore gave me the Potions job... after...' He swallowed, struggling to find the words. 'I knew in my bones that Voldemort would return...despite all the prattle in the *Prophet*...it was just a matter of time. And so... I decided to make the most of my*freedom*, for want of a better word, while I still had the chance.'

'Oh?'

Severus sighed, resting his head on the back of the chair. 'Naturally there were limits; I had my duties as a teacher, and later a housemaster, which took up most of my time. But when I had the chance...holidays, free weekends...I would get away, visit towns and cities, go abroad or seek solitude in remote parts of the highlands, whichever way the mood took me...'

Hermione put her cup down and nodded encouragingly. Kicking her shoes off, she made herself more comfortable on the sofa, tucking her legs to the side and smoothing down her long skirt. Severus smiled at the sight, his thoughts very much brought back to the present, but pressed on with his tale.

'Often, I would take the train back to Scotland...'

'The Hogwarts Express?'

'Don't interrupt!' he snapped. 'No, ordinary Muggle transport...just for a change of pace, you understand, to slow things down a bit sometimes, to watch the countryside go past... and...'

Hermione kept her mouth firmly shut, watching Severus closely. Whatever he had to say was causing him great consternation. Better leave him tell it in his own time, however long that took.

After a pause, Severus tried again. 'On one occasion...it was about two years before you attended Hogwarts, I think...I was staring out of the window, when a woman asked me if the seat opposite was taken. I said no and she sat down. She fussed around with bags and suchlike, eventually settling down with a newspaper.' He stared into his cup. 'I was a bit put out with having my peace and quiet disrupted by all the rustling, to tell the truth, and was seriously considering Disapparating from the toilet...' *and gods I wish I had.* 'Then, she fished around for a pen and started the crossword.'

'Crossword?' Hermione said, no longer able to hide her curiosity. Where could he possibly be going with all this?

'She started muttering,' Severus said, ignoring her, 'nibbling her pen and frowning. "Two down, Aconite," she said. Without thinking, I said "Wolfsbane or Monkshood." She looked at me, surprised, and asked me if I was a botanist. I said not exactly but that I had an interest in plants, and she said she liked flowers but wasn't that knowledgeable, and the conversation went on from there.'

Hermione stared wide-eyed. 'What the hell did you tell her? How to brew Wolfsbane Potion?'

'No, not... exactly.'

'What do you mean, not exactly?'

'I did say that, according to legend, Wolfsbane was associated with Werewolves,' Severus replied calmly. 'Her face lit up at that as it transpired she had an interest in myths and ancient legends. She started babbling about being a writer and that she wanted to come up with a story where folk stories and mythology could be worked into the present day.'

Hermione frowned. 'Severus, are you trying to tell me you divulged the existence of the Wizarding world to a random Muggle woman on a train, who then wrote...? But... Hang on a second, how could she have known...how could you have known...? All this happened before...'

'I know.' He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. 'I'll get to that in a minute. I did not, as you put it, divulge the existence of the Wizarding world to that Muggle. All I did was give her a tale I heard at my mother's knee about a magical school, the fall of a Dark wizard called Grindelwald, the rise of another, his seeming defeat by a baby and a mother's love...she lapped that bit up, incidentally...and that was it.'

'But why, Severus?' Hermione asked, horrified. 'What on earth possessed you to do such a thing?'

What indeed. 'Perhaps because an attractive woman was taking a real interest in me for the first time in my life.'

Hermione snorted. 'You were showing off.'

'When I started talking, I couldn't seem to stop, and she just*listened*.' Severus stood up, put his cup on the mantelpiece, and started pacing. 'I'd never told anyone so much personal information before, but it was a long journey, it passed the time, and I thought I'd be able to do a quick Oblivate before she got off.'

'So why didn't you?'

Severus shrugged. 'Unfortunately, I fell asleep, and when I awoke, she'd gone.' He looked at Hermione, expecting some sort of disparaging comment, but she was just shaking her head in disbelief.

'There wasn't an awful lot I could do,' Severus protested. 'I didn't know her name, and, ultimately, I didn't think that any harm had been done. However... not long after, odd things started to happen.'

'What sort of things?'

'Not much at first, little things.' Severus resumed his pacing. 'The centaurs reported strange goings on in the Forbidden Forest...or, the Friendly Forest as I knew it, then. Dangerous creatures appeared from nowhere. Dumbledore was so worried, he declared it out of bounds, which didn't go down too well with everyone else as it was a favourite place for picnics in summer.'

'You're not serious.'

'But I am. And as for Dumbledore...' Severus let out a long sigh. 'I'd always known him as a rather sober, conservative sort of wizard. Then, overnight, he developed a taste for outlandish robes in clashing colours and a fondness for sherbet lemons, and it didn't end there. Things seemed to get even stranger once your year arrived; I found myself saying and doing things that were so unlike me, I thought I might be possessed at one point...like someone was putting words in my mouth. I caught myself mooning over Lily Evans...who, before you say anything, was an old friend I'd had a crush on, but I was over it by my seventh year. In fact, I was going out with a girl from Ravenclaw by then, but I digress. Days and sometimes weeks just... vanished, but no one else seemed to notice that anything was amiss, apart from me. The Muggle world, however, in the rare moments I managed to go there with Voldemort on the rise again, carried on as normal, as far as I could tell.'

Hermione was very quiet. Severus could almost hear the gears in her mind milling his words, struggling towards a conclusion that would rock her world to its very foundations.

'That is weird...' Hermione said slowly. 'Looking back, I also think there were... inconsistencies in my behaviour...particularly the year we were on the run. In fact, it was downright erratic.'

Severus nodded. 'I noticed. And... I also noticed that there was a conspicuous increase in Muggle-borns in your year...' Severus looked at her intently. '...which I found rather curious. And... to cut a long story short, I did some digging.'

'And?'

'And... I checked the records, the Muggle birth register, for you and your... contemporaries.' Hesitantly, Severus moved towards Hermione and sat down beside her, taking his hands in hers. 'There was no trace of any of you.'

'Severus, you're scaring me.'

'I'm sorry,' he said, squeezing her hands. 'There's no easy way for me to say this. I... decided to ask Minerva, as she'd gone out to the first-year Muggle-born families that year, if she'd had any problems with the parents. She could only really remember yours because they hadn't believed a word she'd said. But when I went to the address she gave me, the people living there had never heard of the Grangers.'

'Wha-what?' Hermione spluttered. 'I don't understand.'

'It was only then,' Severus said gently, 'that I realised Minerva, and probably everyone else in the wizarding world, including you, were visiting a Muggle world very different from the one I knew. I didn't tell anyone because I didn't think they'd believe me. But, when you accompanied me to Chicago, you saw my version of it, saw an exhibition which does not exist in your world. Without me, Hermione, you could not have done so. The same goes for London. Which brings me to the books.'

Hermione wasn't sure if she wanted to know; it was too frightening, but she'd come this far. 'Tell me,' she whispered.

'I didn't know about them until a couple of years ago,' he admitted. 'After the Battle, with my injuries, I didn't venture far from here. But when I did find out, I was... stunned and then the truth, improbable as it was, finally dawned: I had been living in a fabricated reality.'

'No-no, it's not possible!' Hermione tried to pull away, but Severus drew her closer, rubbing circles on her back as she started to sob on his shoulder. 'I'm not a figment of someone's imagination! I'm not. I can't be!'

'Hermione, listen to me.' Gently, Severus prised her away from him and brushed a stray tear from her cheek. 'You ~~are~~ *there*. Now. You are as real and solid as I am.'

'Am I?' she sniffed. 'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure. Now stop crying.' He rummaged in his pocket for a hanky. 'Here. Wipe your eyes.'

'Th-thanks.' Dabbing her eyes, Hermione swallowed heavily. 'So, what you're saying is the Muggle world I come from and visit from time to time is imaginary?'

'No,' Severus replied. 'It's real. For you.'

'But I still don't understand,' she persisted. 'If what you say is true, the time-line is all wrong. She wrote those books after the events happened, creating the-my present from the future. It doesn't make sense.'

'I told you I don't have all the answers,' Severus replied. 'If time went out of sync between the two worlds for those seven years, I didn't notice, but we seem to have caught up. Time, in any case, is relative, and if you throw magic into the mix, well, who knows what can happen. I'm not sure why I'm the only one who can still visit that reality, though...the one with the books...when it's closed to everyone else. Perhaps it's because I was the one who planted the idea in that Muggle's brain, and it fixed me at a point in time and space. But I do believe that the two realities diverged not long after that fateful train journey.' He smiled wryly. 'For all we know, there could be another alternate universe out there somewhere where Potter did not vanquish the Dark...'

'That's horrible! I don't even want to go there...' Hermione blew her nose loudly. 'Huh. I suppose it does go a long way to explain why the memories of my childhood before Hogwarts are so vague, though...if I only came into being at eleven.'

'Quite so.' Drawing his wand, Severus cast a cooling charm on her face. Hermione smiled at him appreciatively. 'I realise this must be a terrible shock for you, Hermione. I'm so sorry you found out about it. But now you do know, the important thing to remember is that you...like me...continued on afterwards. I didn't die like she wanted: you did not pop out of existence. You have made a life for yourself, a career, which was not dictated by anyone else...'

'Oh, my God! I'm supposed to be married to Ron!'

'There. You see?' Severus said chuckling. 'Do I look like Ron Weasley?'

That got a smile out of her.

'And,' he added, pushing her hair away from her face, 'I will tell you this: it will be a cold day in Hell before I let him, or anyone else for that matter, take you away from me.' Severus tilted her chin and kissed her very softly. 'Now. Did that feel real enough for you?'

Hermione bit her lip and frowned. 'I'm not so sure... Perhaps we should repeat the experiment...?'

'Witch...' Smirking, Severus placed a deliberate trail of kisses all along her jaw bone up to her earlobe. 'How about this... or this... or... this...?'

'Oh, yes... That's... that's pretty convincing...'

~ * ~

Sometime later, stretched out on his hearth rug, Severus contemplated the turnabout in his fortunes while tracing his fingertips along the thighs of the woman beside him. Body sticky with sweat, the evidence of their lovemaking all too evident between her legs, he could only wonder at the beauty of her.

'Severus?'

'Hmm...?'

'I was just thinking...'

'You surprise me.' Lazily, Severus flicked his tongue over the nearest nipple, causing her to squeal most satisfactorily.

'No, really,' Hermione said giggling. 'I was just... pondering the nature of reality. I mean, what if everything anyone ever said or did was simply a story penned by some... omnipotent being? What if this... what we're experiencing now... was just the perverted imaginings of some-some sex-mad, middle-aged Muggle...?'

He was over her in an instant, cutting her off with a kiss. 'If that were the case, I would get down on my knees and thank him or her for giving me the most beautiful gift a man could hope for.'

'Me?'

'Yes, you, Unspeakable Granger.' He sighed, shifting his weight as Hermione spread her legs for him, resting his head between her breasts. Her hands were in his hair, raking his scalp; he could die here, a very happy man. 'And after I had done that, I would lay you on the bed, floor, or any other available surface, shove my imaginary cock up your imaginary cunt and fuck you until you were left in no doubt as to the reality of the situation.'

'You are an Unspeakably filthy man, Severus Snape.'

Severus grinned. 'How right you are, my dear. How very right you are. Now, would you like me to give you a hint as to the depths of my depravity, *hmm?ccio olives!*'

~ END~