

Dented and Tarnished

by Ladymage Samiko

Hermione is in possession of a very unique silver box, which has strong ties to one Severus Snape. An extensive drabble series in four parts.

Part the First

Chapter 1 of 4

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"What *are* you doing, Mione?" Harry asked, eyebrows raised.

Hermione brandished the silver box and cloth. "Polishing, of *course*," she huffed.

"Why not just do it magically?"

"I *am*. But *this* needs a lot of care."

Harry stared incredulously at the unlovely object, heavily dented and nearly black with tarnish. "Why's it so important?"

Hermione frowned, working meticulously at a seam. "Because it's the one thing I managed to keep from both Voldemort *and* Dumbledore. Nipped it from right underneath *both* their noses."

"Madwoman. Alright, I'll bite. What didn't you want them to have?"

Hermione beamed brilliantly. "Professor Snape's soul."

Harry turned green. "You mean, that thing's a *Horcrux*? Hermione!"

But the girl shook her head vehemently. "Not at all. Similar idea, I grant, but this isn't an *object* infused with Professor Snape's soul; it's an actual, physical manifestation of it." Harry merely looked confused. Hermione sighed. "This," she stated, holding up the battered box, "*is* his soul. 100% pure. If a little shop-worn," she added sadly, applying herself to its cleaning once again.

"A little *shop-worn*?" Harry gurgled, green again. "That's like saying Voldemort's a *bit naughty*."

Hermione glared at her friend. "It just needs a little looking after."

"May I see it?" Harry asked after a long silence.

Hermione regarded him dubiously. "I don't know, Harry... I don't even know how aware he is. He might not like being passed around like a party favour."

"C'mon, Mione, I've got his ruddy memories on my *shelf*. I just want to, you know, check. It's not like I'm going to parade him 'round Hogsmeade and charge ten Knuts a look."

"Well..." Still uncertain, Hermione nevertheless set the polishing cloth aside and cautiously held the box out. "Careful, then."

Harry grasped it, then yelped, dropping it back into Hermione's anxious hands.

"The bloody git *bit* me!" Harry blew on his heat-reddened hands where Snape's soul had scalded him. Hermione set the box carefully on the table before hauling her friend to the sink.

"I guess that answers... well, several questions," she said shakily as she stuck his hands under cold water. "He *is* aware— up to a point, anyway —and... well... he still doesn't like you very much."

"But he likes *you*?" Harry riposted, glancing side-wise at his friend.

Hermione shrugged uncomfortably before fetching burn paste from the cupboard. "It's— Why— Well— It's only a bit warm when I handle it."

There was a *feeling* beneath her fingers when she held his soul, almost like a pulse, a heartbeat... which she *wasn't* about to mention to Harry. Somehow, it seemed even more... personal... than that silver-filled flask, and she'd *not* expose Severus— or herself —that way. He must feel humiliated enough already, trapped here as a brass-bound silver box.

But she *couldn't* let him go as he was.

His guilt, his regret, every soul-crushing blow... all manifested as tarnish, scratches, and dents.

Hermione'd be damned before letting him go like that. He deserved better, even if only from her.

Harry watched Hermione as rubbed her rag over a stubborn patch of black; she'd picked the damned box up again almost the millisecond she'd finished tending his burn. She was so focused, so intense...

He didn't like it.

Harry took it for granted that Hermione knew magic he didn't; she could probably take *his* soul out and juggle it single-handed along with three or four others if she liked. He also took it for granted that she wouldn't touch Dark magic... not without bloody good reason.

But this... *obsession*... To him, it smacked of Enchantment of the most alarming sort.

"I don't even know what to ask," Harry confessed, keeping his gaze sharp.

"I'm not sure I know how to answer." Hermione settled Severus's soul-box solidly in her lap so she could look back at her friend. "It's... complicated, but..." Hermione paused, trying to order her thoughts. "Professor Snape was... tied— chained —to Voldemort through the Mark and to Dumbledore through his Vows. He'd've spent eternity tugged back and forth between the two.

"He didn't deserve that. I'd read up bindings of those sorts. It's a bit Dark, but when he... died... I used that energy to break his chains."

Harry had gone from green to simply feeling sick. His friend— his *Hermione* —had used death magic. Well... it wasn't as though *she'd* killed Snape, and she had used it to *rescue* his soul...

"But that was before we knew...!" he exclaimed.

Hermione nodded, eyes focusing on the silver incising. "Before *you* knew," she whispered. "I knew. I watched, and I listened, and I *knew*." A hot tear dropped onto the box.

Harry was ready to knock that bloody box out of Hermione's hands when a memory— a memory of a memory —flooded through him.

"*And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?*"

When Harry spoke again, his voice was quiet. "How did he...?" His hand gestured at the box.

"Something went wrong," she explained. "A misspoken word, maybe, or the wrong angle of my wand; I don't know." Hermione gave her friend a wry smile. "I don't make a habit of practicing soul magic."

He chuckled weakly. "Thank Merlin. So... what now? You can't *keep* him, you know."

"Of *course* I know that, Harry! He's not a pet or a knick-knack, for heaven's sake!" Her exasperation reassured him somehow. "I'm just... trying to help him heal before sending him on his way."

Impulsively, Harry launched himself at his friend, enveloping her in a bear hug. "That's our Mione," he grinned. "Heart big enough for the whole world— including a few reprobate Aurors-in-training."

Hermione laughed, hugging him back. "No, I'm *not* cooking dinner tonight," she teased. Harry mock-pouted.

"I'm off to Ginny's, anyway," he said, extracting himself. "Just... be careful, alright?"

She smiled. "I cheated *two* powerful wizards out of this prize, Harry; I won't let anything happen now— to either of us."

Harry returned a lop-sided grin. "Crooks'll keep an eye on you for me."

A childish gesture was her only answer.

A.N.s: So one day, I says to myself, I says, "Self, I feel like a drabble between projects." And myself replies, "Sure, Self, but I have no plot." So I tells myself, "Well, let's pick a challenge at random and come up with something for a drabble or two." And myself says, "Alright. Looks like we've got 'theft.' That gives me an idea." And I says, "Sounds good. Two or three light drabbles should take care of it."

That was forty-three drabbles ago. On Nov. 23, according to my computer. Famous last words... But (unlike some _other_ projects) it's complete; I'll post it in four chunks. The title is from the lyrics of 'Portobello Road' ('Bedknobs and Broomsticks'), and it all began with the alliterative line, "I stole Snape's soul," which I unfortunately had to modify.

As always, tokens dropped in the little box are much appreciated.

Part the Second

Chapter 2 of 4

In which, trying to set things right, something goes terribly wrong.

Slowly, ever-so-slowly, over weeks of painstaking work, the complex patternings on Severus Snape's soul-box emerged from beneath the shrouding layers of tarnish—detailed engravings with all the intricacy of Celtic knot-work. Hermione thought it incredibly beautiful.

More weeks as she used a tiny, magically-crafted hammer to work out the dents.

Hermione brushed her fingers over the lid, giving in to a wave of sadness. It was time, and she knew it. It was time to let Severus's soul go to its rest; she'd done her part to ensure he would go in peace.

She had to let him go.

After a great deal of research and thought, Hermione confessed what she had done to a few carefully chosen friends—friends who knew enough to be of help and cared enough for Severus to try. She still wasn't sure what had gone wrong during the original spell-casting, and then to try to reverse it...

Minerva, Flitwick—even the Malfoys, in the end. All were present for the final working that would free Severus's soul from its physical form. Under their watchful eyes, Hermione began the incantations and guided her wand with impeccable precision.

She completed the complex spell...

...and screamed.

Once the shock of dying had passed, Severus had given into a numb despair; this wasn't the fiery hell of Grandmother Snape's beliefs, but even that would have been better than the empty nothingness that usurped his senses.

Then impressions began forming, impressions that living words could barely begin to describe, and that he couldn't explain. There was a warmth, a candle's flame that grew and changed to first envelop him and then to reach into the deepest corners of his soul. Severus basked in it—drank it in and clung to it with the fervour of a frostbitten man.

Selfish. Selfish to revel in his new-found peace, selfish to rejoice in this blessed warmth. But any guilt seemed to dissipate into nothingness. What he'd done no longer mattered; he'd completed his penance, and it would be more than ungrateful to refuse the gift he was being given.

Was this what they called 'Heaven'?

Did it matter?

Only when something—someone?—tried to rip it away.

Part of him said to let it go; the loss was no more than his due. Another part—newly nurtured in this 'afterlife'—compelled him to hold fast with every bit of his strength.

Twining vines, iron-hot... sharpling hooks burying in... Was this what Severus had felt like with his inimical vows grasping at his soul? This pulling, pushing, straining, tearing, *ripping*...? Struggling to remain in place—

To remain in one piece.

And then it stopped of an instant, leaving Hermione alone in a gasping blackness.

No.

Wait.

Not alone.

The 'vines'... They were still in place, curling around her, but they no longer burned, instead glowing with a comfortable warmth—a comfortable, *familiar* warmth with a comfortable, familiar pulse point.

Like the close embrace of one beloved.

Wonder and delight suffused her. ::*Severus*:::

::Severus?::

Shock. ::Granger?::

::You... *didn't know*?::

::*I didn't know*:: A brief pause. Softly, ::*I didn't care about knowing. But... why*?::

Gently, a little whimsically, ::*Why do I breathe air*?::

Something deeper, richer than laughter. ::*Still... me*?::

::*I could say the same*::

::*You are beautiful and kind. I am not*::

::*Beautiful? Me*?: Embarrassed pleasure. ::*You're just a bit battered, is all. And so incredibly complex... And intelligent and loyal and determined and...*::

Dryly, ::*You're making me blush*:: Underlying baffled satisfaction.

::*Fair's fair*!::

::*And now*? :: Horrified realisation. ::*Are you dead, as well? Did I...?*::

::*I... don't know. But I... don't mind. Severus*::

::*Back you got*::

She clings desperately as the vines of Severus's soul begin to untwine themselves. ::*No*!::

::*You've a life to lead, incredible potential to fulfil*:: Implacable determination. ::*I will not allow you to sacrifice that for me*::

::*Allow*? Allow?: Indignant fury, quickly tempered. ::*It's not your decision alone. Severus. We don't even know what's going on. It may not even be my decision*::

::*I don't want your life on my conscience, Hermione*::

::*I did what I chose to do. I'm responsible for the consequences of my own actions*::

Dryly, ::*That doesn't really help my guilt complexes, though, does it*?:

"How long has she been unconscious?" Harry's fist clenched fitfully.

"Approximately four hours." Mrs. Malfoy's voice was unruffled as she kept watch over the witch, though with a hint of concern in her eyes. "Lucius and Draco are ransacking our library now; Professor McGonagall is doing the same at Hogwarts. Unfortunately," she sighed, "our best researchers are beyond helping us."

"How could this happen? Mione said everything was straightforward."

"Severus was never a straightforward man." The older woman smiled ruefully, and Harry found his own lip quirked.

"Would you—" Harry hesitated, then ploughed on. "Would you tell me...? About him?"

"We'd already plundered the Restricted Section."

"Much of our library was confiscated after the war; we've been recovering volumes, but..."

"Have you searched the Bodleian? I seem to recall..."

"Perhaps the Bibliothèque Magique...? Quite a good collection, I understand."

"Some acquaintances in Prague; they might..."

"Could try America; the Yanks have been known to pick up the odd artefact..."

"*Pinch* the odd artefact, you mean."

"Did we take into account the effect of the polishing spell?"

"I think we might have left out this variable early."

"And the initial spell went wrong there?"

"Professor, she's been unconscious for *twelve hours*."

"Damn!" Lucius swore as he slammed his book shut. "We need Severus. He's the only idiot who could follow these bloody leaps of logic."

"Leaps of logic...?" Harry paused a moment, then leapt to his feet, pounding his fist on the table. "That's it!"

"That's what, Mister Potter?" Minerva queried primly.

"Logic! Mione used to say that only one wizard in a thousand could be arsed about *logic*! That it was all 'grimoires, guts, and guesswork!'" Harry began loping around the room. "What we *haven't* been doing is looking at this logically. The way Hermione and Professor Snape *would*."

"Okay." Harry took a deep breath even as he circumnavigated the magnificent Malfoy library. "Hermione always says begin at the beginning. The freeing spell she

performed."

"The one she mis-cast?" Flitwick piped.

"Ye—es," Harry performed an about-face. "She said it was to 'break the chains' between him and Dumbledore and Voldemort."

"We have her notes; we've all examined them. The spell itself was perfectly sound," Minerva added stoutly. "Severus's soul *should* have passed on freely. But something went awry; he ended up as a silver box."

Harry stopped short, nearly falling over. "But," he blinked, "what if she *didn't* mis-cast?"

AN: Many thanks for the reviews; I hope part two was just as interesting! -Lm. S.

Part the Third

Chapter 3 of 4

in which some of the correct answers are found, but not all of the resolutions.

"Look, we've all been assuming that there's an unknown factor at work: the spell element changed by Mione's mistake." Words poured rapidly from Harry's brain. "But you and Professor Flitwick've seen Hermione's work. You know *she doesn't make mistakes*. I've seen her cast spells perfectly even while being chased by Death Eaters. And a spell like this— she'd make bloody sure she knew *exactly* what she was doing. It was a risky spell, but then she'd simply have perfected her casting."

"So if the unknown factor didn't come from Miss Granger or the spell," Flitwick mused, "it *must* have come from Severus himself!"

::*It's very peaceful here*::

(Lucius roared with laughter. Narcissa raised an eyebrow.)

::*Yes. Not quite Heaven, if I understand you correctly, but far closer than I ever expected to get*::

("Trust Severus to snarl things up!")

::*I'm sorry I didn't get it right the first time, Severus*::

::*Who says you didn't?*::

(Yards of parchment were tossed aside.)

::*But I— you—*::

::*Would you rather have forgone these past few months, Hermione?*::

("Poor girl spent so much time believing...")

::*No*::

("She followed her heart, Professor." Harry remarked.)

::*Then perhaps I have finally attracted the attention of a benevolent deity*::

::*What would you do, Severus?*::

::*Hm?*::

::*If you... had more time. Now that Snake-face is gone*::

A smirk. :: *Sit back and bask in the glow of your affections*::

::*Severus*::

::*I have no grand ambitions anymore. Perhaps it's this place... Perhaps it's you. But I have love and freedom. I accomplished what I needed to do. What more is there?*::

Quietly. :: *You know how to flatter a girl*::

::*Only returning the favour. And in the end... I can wait for you, if need be*::

A sigh. ::*I must still be alive, then. I can't bear the thought of being without you*::

"Factor in this sine curve," Flitwick muttered. "Enhanced by the 56° diagonal following..."

"Filius, that's a Transfiguration sequence," Minerva interrupted, "but without the final parabola to solidify the new form."

"Leaving the object in a state of flux," he concluded.

"A soul unbound creates its own reality." Narcissa raised a disdainful brow at the others' stares. "Did you think Lucius the only wizard in this house? Soul magic encompasses a great deal of theory, including this: a soul without physical or metaphysical ties—such as a body—creates its own bindings. That's what makes it such a powerful magical force."

Harry continued pacing. "Why didn't Snape go through the Veil? Why a box? Why not a ghost? Why's Hermione—?"

Narcissa gestured sharply, cutting him off. "To be a ghost, one must have a strong attachment to a person or place." She added dryly, "I hardly think Severus was *that* fond of his dungeons."

"Hardly," Lucius drawled. His expression turned thoughtful. "He spent most of his life under some sort of constraint; once released, he simply may not have known what to do."

"So the box manifested... A grounding," Narcissa mused, "a reflection of what he is, how he perceives himself."

::What do you want in life, Granger?:

A surprisingly long pause. ::Everyone I love safe and happy. That's it, really. Everyone,:: and Hermione snuggled in close, ::I love.

...and books. Masses of books.::

She couldn't hear laughter, but felt the great, resounding swell of amusement. ::I'd expect nothing else of you. ...but I'd have thought... a brilliant career... children... fame and fortune...?:

A negative. ::You know better than I: war strips life to its essentials. Those are my essentials. Children... Perhaps. But are they having more people to love or more hostages to fate?:

::It's terrifying, Hermione. Life always is.::

Narcissa Malfoy was a difficult woman to read. While she was working, she didn't mutter like Professor Flitwick or gesture expansively like Professor McGonagall. Even her face remained impassive, and her body was perfectly still until she required a reference, which she would fetch, peruse with long, delicate fingers in graceful movements, and precisely replace.

It all made Harry want to scream and shake her until her teeth rattled—they needed an answer, not a lesson in deportment!—but Lucius Malfoy seemed content to wait upon his wife as she imitated Elegance in Marble.

And so he waited, pacing incessantly. Twenty-seven hours.

Copperplate script flowed from her pen. "This should be adequate to our purpose," Narcissa remarked, handing the finished parchment to her husband.

He h'mmed as he read the incantations. "It was that simple?" he asked.

"It fits all our known facts." She replaced the quill in its silver-chased stand. "Miss Granger's body is still functioning; it should merely be a matter of properly replacing her in it. The difficult factor will be Severus."

"How astonishing," Lucius added wryly. "I don't suppose we could—? We can't very well leave him like that."

"We shall inquire of Miss Granger when she returns."

Gentle, yet insistent tugs, pulling her away, taking her away, separating her from him. ::No!: She grasps, clings, holds, but inexorably, he slips from her grip, loosening his own hold on her. Desperate, she pours her grief upon him, her yearning, the emptiness that his soul had filled.

But he is too used to such things. He does not retaliate with his own feelings of loss, of agony; he keeps them close as he has always done.

And, as he has always done, he leaves in place a single bond that stretches elastic-taut and fragile between them. Memory... and hope.

She didn't seem like Hermione anymore. Returned to consciousness, she had simply turned away and sobbed. She didn't say, "Thanks, Harry," or "Sorry to worry you." No, she'd only looked at him with pained eyes, clutching that damned soul-box of Snape's, and gone off with the Malfoys, who were *definitely* hiding something. Then they'd all disappeared into the depths of the Manor, and only their attendance at meals kept Harry from demanding entrance.

Seeing her tired, pinched face, Harry wanted to take that bloody box and hurl it into the fireplace. If she'd ever left it alone, he might have.

Harry snapped the morning she came home at dawn, her shoes and jeans muddied, her hands blistered.

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing?" he screamed.

"You wouldn't understand," she said tiredly. "When it's over, I *promise* I'll explain. But right now... you just wouldn't understand."

"Hermione, *listen* to yourself! You're talking like... like one of *them*!"

"Maybe that's what I *am* now," Hermione snapped.

"So it's all for the *greater good*, then?"

"It's for *my* good. And for *Severus's*. As long as I'm not hurting anyone, doesn't he deserve that consideration?"

"Not hurting anyone? What about *yourself*, Hermione?"

ANs: One more handful of drabbles to go! Many thanks for the little tokens of appreciation so far.

Part the Fourth

Chapter 4 of 4

...in which everything is resolved as it should be.

Hermione began avoiding... well, nearly everyone after her shouting match with Harry. She didn't need— couldn't *stand*—any more emotional turmoil. The Malfoys were— oddly —safe. They cared about *him*, they knew what they were doing— and they didn't ask for more than she could give.

And Hermione was beginning to respect Narcissa in a way she'd never believed possible.

Another week and their preparations were nearly complete. Hermione could see herself in the mirror, face drawn, hair a bird's nest atop her head.

"Don't worry," Narcissa murmured in her ear. "We'll fix you up properly when the time comes."

Fingers flexed experimentally, eyes blinked with exaggerated care. His mouth moved, but if he'd wanted to speak, no sound emerged. Hermione hesitantly threaded her fingers through his, looking anxiously for his expression as he registered her presence.

"In—" he wheezed with rusty vocal chords. "In... sufferably im... patient little girl."

But there was no bite, no anger to his words, and Hermione managed a wobbly smile. "I didn't see why we had to wait," she whispered.

And there was another harsh, grating sound— Severus's laugh. "Cleverest witch of her age."

"The Malfoys helped," she murmured, reddening.

"That's... what I mean."

She wouldn't let go. His hand, his robe, his hair... (A fastidious Narcissa shuddered at that last.) Hermione would not leave Severus alone. Perhaps, the older witch mused, it had something to do with her habits with Severus's soul-box.

Or it might be sheer relief. She and her beloved Lucius, after all, just after the war... Well, it was surprising that Draco wasn't yet to have a sibling.

But explanations were in order. The 'good' wizards were present to hear them. Narcissa glanced sidelong at the couple; it was their story, their right to tell it in their own way.

Snape allowed Hermione to recount her version of events; his own was for no other ears but hers. Besides, his voice was still recovering from months of being buried.

When she had finished, Minerva wore her most disapproving look, and Potter was— unsurprisingly —livid.

"Necromancy," Minerva said severely, "is expressly forbidden." She avoided meeting his eyes. Disgust for a 'revenant'? Or guilt?

"Necromancy is disapproved of because it meddles with souls beyond the Veil," Narcissa interjected smoothly, "which is far from what we accomplished, Professor. It was simply a matter of healing the body and returning Severus's soul to it."

Potter became a very queer— and rather delightful —shade of green. "*That's* what you were doing that night? When you came back all muddy?"

Hermione shrugged with admirable nonchalance. "Wards prevented me from digging up his body magically, and unlike *some people*, Severus didn't rate a *mausoleum* with a *monument*," she replied with asperity.

"That's just... *sick*."

"It's not like I fucked his corpse," Hermione snapped back. "Would you rather I found someone *else's* body to put him in? Severus was in two pieces; we merely put him back together."

"He's dead! He shouldn't be in *anyone's* body at all!"

"If you wish me dead, Potter, you'll have to kill me yourself." His rasping, metal-on-slate voice caused the others to wince. "That goes for you, too, *Professor* McGonagall, *Professor* Flitwick. My soul is in my body. Which moves and breathes of its own accord. I am more alive now than I have been at any point in the last thirty-eight years." Hermione had draped herself, cat-like, along the arm and back of his chair, and he deliberately tilted his head back against her. "I refuse to simply lie down and die because *you* don't approve of my continued existence."

"Feel free, if you must," Severus goaded them. "Here I am, without my wand. *Avada* me into the next world if it suits your sense of morality. My soul is at peace; it wouldn't bother *me*. It might," he allowed as Hermione tightened her hold, "bother *her*." He could practically feel the girl's glare over his head. Potter and Flitwick turned red; Minerva still refused to 'see' him. "So if you consider me simply a reanimated corpse, then by all means." He spread upraised hands. "Do it.

"Do precisely what you've wanted to do for the past year, *my friends*."

"Still too difficult?" he spat. "Then allow me to make it easier for you." Snape pulled himself to his feet, struggling with a body that now felt composed of solid lead. He

turned, offering them his back, his arms suspended in empty air to either side. He quelled Hermione's movement with a sharp, sidelong glance. "There. Now you don't even have to look me in the face. It's just a robe, here, on a stand. *Surely* you can knock down a *robe*."

"Severus Snape, cease these childish histrionics immediately."

"Ah, I see I *do* exist in your universe, Minerva. Finally."

"You're being deliberately obstreperous, Severus."

"And you were deliberately ignoring me, *Professor* McGonagall. But I was also being deliberately honest. I don't mind being dead; Miss Granger took care of that quite nicely. But for her sake, I won't give up living just because it's less troublesome for you.

"The truth is, you're upset that Granger is precisely what you've groomed her to be: intelligent, compassionate, and self-sacrificing. Admittedly, I'm an odd choice for compassion, but there you are; Granger doesn't discriminate.

"She is also considerate— she *asked if I was willing* to return —and more stubborn than a mule."

"Granger cares," Severus murmured, his hand reaching to ghost over her hair, cup her cheek. She gazed back at him, her eyes full of her emotions. "And for *me* of all people. It is a strange, new thing in my life.

"As I imagine you're well aware of, *Potter*," he added caustically. "I'll have that vial returned, *if* you please."

His voice gentled again, but kept a hard edge of determination. "She cares, and I'll not see her suffer any more for that caring than she already has. She deserves your admiration for her ability and resourcefulness, not your condemnation."

Slowly, objections were reasoned away and resistance worn through. Minerva and Severus went for a long walk around the grounds, talking through issues both past and present. Narcissa and Lucius proved (perhaps unsurprisingly) capable advocates, arguing points of law and subtleties of soul magic. And when Severus returned to the house, he found a Hermione transformed by a woman's particular magic into a creature that took his breath away.

:: *You've stolen my soul again, you brazen witch.* ::

:: *Only because you pinched mine when I wasn't looking, you conniving wizard.*::

:: *Truce, then?* ::

:: *Truce. ...I love you, Severus.* ::

:: *I love you, Hermione.* ::

ANs:Well, there you are. A drabble series complete in four parts. I hope it has proved satisfying for your HGSS needs. I worried a bit about wrapping it up a bit too abruptly, but at the time, I was a little more worried about having it drag on too long, so I made the executive decision. As always, tokens in the little box below are appreciated, be they positive or critical. Thank you to those who have made their donations so far.