

Eburos

by Lady Silma

Magic can't fix everything, especially people. Hermione makes a visit and learns that some things might be broken forever, no matter how hard you try.

Phoenix Rising

Chapter 1 of 3

Magic can't fix everything, especially people. Hermione makes a visit and learns that some things might be broken forever, no matter how hard you try.

In the writing that follows, I cheerfully ignore the epilogue to *Deathly Hallows*, but will otherwise attempt to work within the bounds of canon. I am quite certain that Severus Snape is dead from a purely canonical point of view, but I offer this bit of alternative fiction as a way for me to play with the characters I love. I am not British and am therefore ignoring British spelling and using the US version of Harry Potter as my reference. Nevertheless, I have attempted to keep phrases and words as close to British English as possible.

I own none of the places, characters, or ideas created by JK Rowling that appear in this story. I take credit for everything else.

Thank you Southern Witch for betaing this for me.

Chapter 1- Phoenix Rising

The perfect quiet of Godric's Hollow was disrupted by a soft popping noise, which sent a nearby squirrel racing up a tree. Tail twitching, the squirrel looked down at the cloaked figure that had materialized out of nothing. The woman stood rigid and still, clutching a profusion of flowers in both hands. She looked up and down the deserted street and, evidently satisfied with the silence, walked along the road. The squirrel tracked her progress past a stone structure until she strode out of its sight. Waiting warily for a moment, the furry creature scampered back down the tree to reclaim its abandoned acorn.

On the other side of the dark stone monument, the woman passed under a kissing gate and into the graveyard. Her trek was marked by the brittle crunching of fall leaves beneath her feet. Pausing in front of a headstone, she separated a bunch of white lilies from her bouquet and replaced them with a withered wreath that was already laid against the stone. The clean white of the flowers were bright against the carpet of brown leaves.

She observed the grave with a sad and serious expression in her brown eyes. There had been too much death, too many losses, in both the past and the present. The graves that surrounded her stood as sober witnesses to the destruction. A piercing caw from a nearby crow startled the woman out of her reverie. She glanced up into the cloudy sky, then drew a wand out of her robes. A flick of her wand and a softly spoken spell vanished the dead wreath in front of her. She ran her fingers over the words cut into the stone, lingering over the second name, and then stood.

Two rows back, she hesitated before another headstone. Ariana Dumbledore's grave was kept tidy...grass clipped, flowers fresh, and stone moss-free...but the witch who lingered a few paces away thought the spot seemed neglected all the same. She felt it was a pity, really, that Ariana remained overlooked by the wizarding world, even after the publication of Rita Skeeter's infamous *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*.

"At least you were spared all this," she murmured, half to Ariana and half to herself. She bent down to place the remaining flowers next to the grave when a deafening crack rended the pervasive calm of Godric's Hollow. With a frightened screech, the woman scrambled backwards and tripped in a tangle of robes and flailing legs. Amidst a

shower of her forsaken flowers, she landed on her bottom with a bone-jarring thud.

A pristine envelope now rested on top of Ariana's grave. The witch eyed the note, mouth twisted into a moue. In spindly handwriting, teasingly familiar, the envelope read:
To Miss Hermione Jean Granger.

The recipient of the letter, being a witch possessed with a rather formidable trove of knowledge, appeared to be more doubtful than surprised by the letter's arrival...although her sore bottom had as much to do with her current scowl as her suspicion of dark magic did. Hermione scrutinized the graveyard. The place was deserted, but for a single squirrel perched atop a gravestone and grasping an acorn to its chest.

"I certainly hope you weren't responsible for that," she quipped sharply. With a rather prim sniff, Hermione flourished her wand and proceeded to check the letter for hexes, curses, and jinks. Finding nothing amiss, she picked the letter up and turned it over. A seal was pressed into red wax: a phoenix, wings raised, bursting into flames.

Hermione became as rigid and still as when she had first Apparated into Godric's Hollow. Her fingers danced lightly over indented wax, feeling and memorizing grooves that were made over a year ago. Breaking the seal with great care, Hermione unfolded the letter and read:

My Dear Miss Granger,

Let me start in the hopes that this letter finds you and yours well. It is never easy living in the aftermath of war, but sitting where I am now, having just come from dinner in the Great Hall and having seen the smiling faces of you, Mr. Potter, and Mr. Weasley, I cannot help but hope that the end of Tom Riddle came with as little hurt and bloodshed as possible. This may seem a silly wish to you: war is not pleasant, nor is it painless, but remember, Miss Granger, that a belief in love and peace is more powerful than any magic you will ever learn in your classes at Hogwarts.

That you are in possession of this letter means that my sincere wishes for a painless end to the war have not occurred for everyone.

When I left you a copy of "The Tales of Beedle the Bard" in my will, I trusted that you would do with it as I intended. I write you this letter now out of the selfish desires of an old man who hopes that you will once again fulfill a task for which I have not prepared you.

You have found your way to my sister Ariana's grave, and this must mean you have learned a great many things about my past that you did not know before. Your experience in the wizarding world has taught you that not everything is as it seems. I ask that you remember this in the near future.

You may trust that whatever Nestor Nettlebot tells you is the truth.

Yours most sincerely,

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore

With another thunderous crack, Hermione Jean Granger disappeared from Godric's Hollow, leaving behind a thoroughly affronted squirrel that had once again abandoned its acorn in favor of the safety of the trees.

Nestor Nettlebot was not pleased. He was a large wizard with bulky muscles and thick, black eyebrows that gave him a perpetually disgruntled look. This meant that, in times such as the present, the corridors of the Ministry of Magic cleared out as quick as a niffler on the trail of gold when Nettlebot wore an infuriated expression to match his eyebrows. He arrived in front of Department of Mysteries door number 15.6-C with his robes issuing a tremendous cloud of lime-green smoke. The wispy wizard standing outside door 15.6-C thought Nestor smelled remarkably similar to rotting troll flesh...and that was putting the matter kindly...but he wisely kept his mouth shut.

"William, get Edgington over to Experimental Mishaps now," Nestor growled.

William abandoned his post in a swish of robes, calling over his shoulder, "Right away, sir."

Watching William retreat down the hall, Nestor nodded in satisfaction and let his scowl melt from his face. He discarded his robes into a rubbish bin next to the door and fiddled with the collar of his suit. There had been enough catastrophes for one day. Nestor sincerely hoped that he was not about to walk into another one.

"I would like my wand," Hermione stated succinctly when Nestor was through the door. She was standing by the room's only window, arms folded across her chest.

"Certainly, Miss Granger." From inside his shirtsleeve Nestor pulled out a sturdy vine wood wand and placed it on the table in the middle of the room. "Simply a precaution; I trust you understand. It is standard Ministry procedure to confiscate any wizard's or witch's wand upon Portkey directly into the Ministry."

Hermione tucked her wand away and pushed a bushy bit of hair out of her face. "And is it now standard Ministry procedure to Portkey innocent wizards and witches without permission? To detain them with no explanation? I thought the Ministry was through with such actions now that Voldemort is gone."

Nestor pursed his lips, but chose to ignore the questions. "Would you care to sit, Miss Granger?" He indicated a chair across the table and took a seat in the one in front of him.

"If this is about Voldemort and the fight at Hogwarts, I've already told the Ministry..."

"This has nothing to do with Harry Potter's defeat of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, at least not directly."

A silent moment passed in which wizard and witch stared at each other. Whatever it was this wizard wanted, Hermione decided she would at least hear what he had to say. Dumbledore's letter must have had something to do with her appearing here, and there was no point in antagonizing a Ministry already frazzled by the changes in a post-Voldemort world. Her chair scraped along the floor tiles as she pulled it out and seated herself.

"I had intended to introduce myself upon first meeting you," Nestor began. A pink tinge flushed Hermione's cheeks, and he waited until she met his eye. "My name is Nestor Nettlebot. I believe you have heard of me?"

Hermione cleared her throat. "Yes. I had a letter."

"From Albus Dumbledore," Nettlebot clarified.

"Yes," Hermione said and then amended, "perhaps." She pressed her hand against the letter in her pocket, and it crinkled against her thigh.

"I can assure you that the letter was from Dumbledore." Nettlebot pulled a card out of his jacket pocket and handed it to Hermione. "Incidentally, should you try to tell anyone unrelated to what is happening here about me or my department, you will find that you are suddenly at a loss for words."

Hermione glanced at the card, then back at Nestor, both perplexed and miffed. "You're an Unspeakable? But what does Professor Dumbledore's letter have to do with the Department of Mysteries?"

"Albus Dumbledore has everything to do with the Department of Mysteries, and I am sure he will continue to be a very influential figure in our department five, ten, or even twenty years after his death." Nettlebot tapped his wand against the tabletop, and a thin file popped onto the surface. Hermione saw a glimpse of writing, penned in neat

handwriting at one corner of the file, but Nestor covered the script with his hand before she could read the words.

"This file will explain part of your question...though I am sure you will have many more after you have looked at it...and I have something to show you afterwards that will shed more light on the matter." Nettlebot slid the folder across the table, but kept his hand on it, holding it in place, even after Hermione reached to take it.

"Sir?" she asked.

"I had wanted you to take a wizard's oath that you would not speak about this file with anyone, but Dumbledore assured me it would be unnecessary. I hope, however, that you will be entirely discreet with what you are about to learn. Our department has rarely allowed anyone access to these type of files without some binding oath to secrecy."

Hermione worried her lip and looked down at the two hands resting on top of the file: his large, hers small; one hesitant and one eager. "I will do my best, Mr. Nettlebot," Hermione promised and Nestor relinquished the folder to her at last.

She settled the file in front of her...square against the table edge, drawing out her greedy curiosity...before reading the name that had been hidden underneath Nettlebot's hand.

"Professor Snape? But I don't know anything about him," she protested. It wasn't entirely true...she did know several important things about the professor's past...but he was still an utter mystery to her.

Nestor nodded to the file by way of explanation. Folding back the cover, Hermione glanced over the information penned in precise, black ink. The professor's life was meticulously recorded between the covers of the folder. A queer tightness settled in Hermione's chest as she scanned the generic information on top and found his current employment still listed as Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

There were so many things that no one had ever known about him, things Hermione was sure that no one even thought to wonder about: His birthday was January 9; he owned a home, inherited from his parents, called Spinner's End; his first display of magic occurred in an embarrassing incident involving an exploding toilet when he was three. A few pages later, she smiled to discover he had earned eleven O.W.L.s, just as she had done. Following his academic achievements and mishaps was an abundance of pages regarding his affairs as a Death Eater and Order of Phoenix member, witnessed through interviews and rumors, newspaper clippings and reports. There were so many pages...Hermione saw no end in sight no matter how many she turned over...that she was certain magic had been used to arrange the folder that had appeared so thin when sitting on the tabletop.

"The file is yours to keep," Nestor said. "We have a duplicate copy at the Ministry, but Dumbledore believed you would need your own. You can take it home with you to look it over in detail at your convenience."

"It appears you were correct, Mr. Nettlebot," Hermione replied as she shut the folder. "I have several new questions, but it may be easier if you showed me whatever it is you wanted me to see." She shrunk the folder with a spell and slipped it inside her robes, following Nettlebot as he led her out the door and down a corridor. At the end of the hall, they passed through another door and into a room that she had hoped to never see again.

"You should feel quite at home in here," Nestor remarked. They stood in the center of a room, ringed on all sides by identical doors. "It was very clever of you to use *Flagrate*."

"Not clever enough. It didn't work, did it?" Hermione clenched her teeth and stared ahead.

"No," Nettlebot agreed, "but I've seen worse attempts." He squared his broad shoulders and called out clearly, "Spinner's End, Snape residence." His voice set the doors whirling around the walls, moving faster until they were a blur of solid wood. The wind whipped their hair and tugged at their robes before the revolving slowed and came to a stop.

"Right then." Nettlebot opened the door that came to rest in front of him and waved Hermione through. "On you go."

Hermione gaped at him. "That's all you have to do?" she asked, incredulous.

Nestor's lips twitched as he motioned Hermione through to the shadowed room beyond. "Not everything needs to be complicated, Miss Granger."

It was an oppressively drab place that they entered. A dull, golden light flickered from a candle set on a table, illuminating the outline of a bed. Moldering window covers and dusty, gray bed hangings swallowed what light and sound was left, save for a rasping wheeze that emanated from the bed. The air was stale, and Hermione wrinkled her nose as she moved deeper inside.

From the gloom of the bed, a shape began to coalesce. Hermione could make out a long, prone form, and then a face appeared, sallow and sheen with sweat, followed by a pair of glittering black eyes that rendered her still and dumb.

She gasped and clapped a hand to her mouth, backing into the wide chest of Nettlebot. She spun on her heel, eyes large. "My God. But he..." She darted a glance over her shoulder. "I saw him."

"It seems, even after death, Dumbledore is not finished meddling in others' affairs," Severus Snape replied in a winded hiss from the bed.

Spinner's End

Chapter 2 of 3

Magic can't fix everything, especially people. Hermione makes a visit and learns that some things might be broken forever, no matter how hard you try.

I own none of the places, characters, or ideas created by JK Rowling that appear in this story. I take credit for everything else.

Thank you, Southern Witch, for betaing this for me.

Chapter 2- Spinner's End

The shock, combined with the musty, humid air, proved too much for Hermione. She sank into a squashy chair by the bed and fisted her hands in her lap. There were few occasions in which Hermione's instinct had failed her and even fewer instances when her intelligence had. When Nagini had tore into Snape's throat, she knew instinctively

that the bite would be fatal, and after the Potions master had given Harry his crucial memories, Hermione knew rationally that he was dead. It was the only sensible conclusion, yet here in this squalid, little room, Severus Snape lay alive, a little worse for wear, but living in defiance of all Hermione's formidable acumen.

"I'm sorry," she said faintly. She pressed a hand to her racing heart and let the rapid thumping against her fingers steady her. With a great composure she did not feel yet, she said, "I don't understand how this is possible. I saw him die, and Harry said..."

"Now there's a trustworthy fount of magical knowledge," Severus snarled. His disdain was so complete that neither Nestor nor Hermione knew how to respond. Nettlebot hummed noncommittally, and Hermione flushed a bright red that enveloped her entire face. From the first announcement of Voldemort's ultimate defeat, Harry Potter mania had gripped the Wizarding world fast and hard. Harry could do no wrong, and it had been many months since Hermione had heard anything but adulation uttered for her very good friend. Even Rita Skeeter...in complete disregard of her newly published book...had penned a glowing report of Harry's heroics. The article had appeared on the front page of the *Daily Prophet* with a bold headline that declared Harry to be the Salvation of the Wizarding World.

Snape's continued hatred of Harry, so reassuringly familiar, worked better than any healing potion for Hermione's spinning head. "But Professor Dumbledore and Sir Nicholas told Harry that people can't be brought back from death," Hermione appealed to Nestor in a great rush. She shot a timid glance at Severus, who was scowling at her and Nettlebot in great irritation and pain.

"The simple explanation is that Severus Snape was never dead, Miss Granger," Nestor replied. Hermione bestowed a dubious gaze on the Unspeakable which deeply impressed both men in the room with her opinion on the matter. This was not a witch to be contradicted with such a blasé explanation.

"I know what I saw, Mr. Nettlebot," she told him determinedly.

"What I would like to know," Severus interrupted in a measured tone that reminded Hermione of her days in the Potions classroom, "is what Miss Granger has to do with any of this. I may be forced to endure the Ministry's intrusive presence, but I want the girl out of my house. She is useless here. I refuse to endure her pointless nattering." His long fingers convulsed on the top of his blanket, and he pressed his palms flat against the bed to hide his shaking. Beside him, Hermione tried to keep the injured look off her face, hiding her mortification in the shadows of her winged back chair.

"Ah, yes. I'm glad you asked," Nestor answered, ignoring Snape's latter comments. He produced a letter from inside his jacket and held it up for Hermione and Severus to see. "I had my own message from Dumbledore, you see, though mine was delivered far sooner than yours, Miss Granger." He tucked the parchment back into his suit. "Dumbledore's correspondence arrived shortly after I received news of You-Know-Who's attack on Hogwarts. It informed me that Headmaster Snape was in grave danger and provided me with incontrovertible proof of his loyalty to Dumbledore.

"It took me an hour to trace him to the Shrieking Shack. He was motionless on the floor when I discovered him, lying in an alarming amount of blood. At first I thought he was dead...the neck wound should have killed him in minutes...but when I examined him closer, I could feel a faint pulse in his wrist. I brought him to the Department of Mysteries where we treated his wounds as best as we could and then moved him here. It wasn't until the following day that the immobility wore off. We were all astonished when his neck wound healed within a week, clearly aided by some magic we were never able to determine. The Healer told us he was very fortunate and that the snake venom may have played a role in his survival."

"Pity," Severus interjected with renewed vehemence.

Hermione noticed his hands begin to tremble again, and she braced for another bitter outburst. But instead of harsh words, Severus turned nearly white and succumbed to a coughing fit that clenched and burned his lungs and made him nauseous. The cough rattled his ribs and turned his steady breathing to wheezy gasps for air.

Hermione jumped out of her chair and hovered anxiously by the bed. "Isn't there anything we can do? Is there a Calming Draught somewhere?" She looked around the room, but the two tables flanking the bed only held a mix of useless objects: a stack of dusty books, a cracked glass, several empty potion bottles, and a moldy piece of toast.

Nestor opened the door Hermione and he had entered through, but it no longer opened into the Department of Mysteries. Instead, a dreary hallway now stood opposite Snape's bedroom, illuminated by the yellowish light filtering through a grimy window. Nestor shouted into the hallway. "Tilly, you are needed upstairs."

Seconds later, a tiny house-elf appeared in the doorway, clutching a tray of potion bottles between thickly bandaged hands. She was wearing a pristine pillowcase dotted with pink flowers, and her droopy ears flattened against her head as she entered the room.

"Tilly is hearing your call for help, Mr. Nettlebot, sir. Tilly is being a good house-elf and coming right away to bring Master Snape his potions, sir." Tilly padded into the bedroom but stopped several feet from the bed. She goggled at Hermione, who smiled encouragingly at the elf.

"And a fine job you've done, too. Thank you, Tilly." Nestor bent and took the tray from her hands. "Can you please bring the professor a glass of water?"

Tilly's ears perked upward and she bobbed her head enthusiastically. "Tilly will be getting that right away, sir. You can trust Tilly." She ran from the room in a patter of feet which were quickly lost in the hacking coughs coming from the bed. Hermione frowned at the empty doorway, hands on her hips. "She hurt herself. Did you see the bandages on her hands?"

"Come hold him steady, Miss Granger," Nestor commanded. "I won't be able to administer the Calming Draught with him moving around like this." Nestor placed the tray Tilly had brought on top of a teetering pile of books. The glass bottles glinted in the candlelight as Nettlebot rummaged through the substantial collection of potions crammed onto the tray.

Lips pressed together, Hermione stood by the bed. The gravity of Snape's illness was clearer now that she could examine him closer. Dark circles smudged the skin beneath his eyes, and the hole that Nagini had torn into his neck was healed in a long pucker of flesh, though it was still discolored by a fading yellow-brown bruise. He had lost more weight than she had originally thought; his skin was stretched taut and clammy across his face. She tentatively pressed a hand to his shoulder and felt the damp fabric of his nightshirt.

"You'll need to do better than that. Get your arm around his shoulder and prop him up," Nestor growled, the command a faint glimmer of the authority that had made him head of the Department of Mysteries.

Hermione wedged her arm underneath Snape's shoulders and heaved him upward so that he fell awkwardly against her chest. With one leg propped on top of the bed, she grit her teeth and tried to hold him as steady as she could. Nestor tipped a bottle of viscous liquid into Severus' mouth, who choked and sputtered but managed to swallow the potion.

A moment passed, then two, in which there was no change, and Hermione started to count the seconds until Snape went gradually limp against her, his head lolling to one side. He was a heavy weight despite his appearance. Hermione needed Nestor's help to maneuver the professor fully onto the bed.

They were spreading the blankets back over Severus when Tilly came in. The elf handed a glass of water to Nettlebot, then stood on tiptoe to peer fretfully over the bed. "Master Snape will be alright now, sir?"

"For the moment," Nestor reassured her. He set the glass of water on the bedside table. "Will you take Miss Granger to the kitchen, Tilly? She might like a cup of tea while I finish up here."

Hermione followed Tilly down a flight of dark stairs and into a shabby sitting room. The kitchen was down another hallway. While the rest of the house was falling into disrepair, the kitchen was immaculate. A jumble of Muggle appliances were scattered across the counters, and bright, warm sunlight streamed through a window above the sink.

Hermione sank into a chair beside a rickety metal table while Tilly set about making the tea. The elf moved around the kitchen with a bustling confidence that belied her anxious manner upstairs.

"Tilly, what happened to your hands?" Hermione asked. A frown tugged the corners of her lips downward when Tilly's ears dropped close against her head.

"Tilly must be punishing herself for being a bad house-elf. Master Snape is not wanting Tilly's help, but she is helping him anyway. Master Snape is not always knowing what is best for him, but Tilly knows. She helps him when he works as Headmaster at Hogwarts." The little house-elf puffed her chest out with pride.

"You're a Hogwarts house-elf?"

"Yes, miss. Tilly was in charge of Master Snape's rooms when he was being Headmaster at Hogwarts. When Tilly is hearing that Master Snape is ill, she comes to his home to help him get better. He was always being very kind to Tilly at Hogwarts." The kettle on the stove whistled shrilly, and Tilly poured the boiling water into a brown teapot on the table.

As much as Hermione hated to order a house-elf to do anything, she thought this situation might warrant the breach of her magical creature code of ethics. If Snape's waspish temper was any indication, poor Tilly might find herself in a full body cast before long. It was for her own protection, Hermione decided.

"Tilly, I don't want you to hurt yourself anymore when you do something Professor Snape orders you not to. You are not to punish yourself. Do you understand?"

Tilly looked at Hermione, her shoulders half hunched beneath the pillowcase, ears still flat against her head, before she slowly straightened up and beamed. "Yes, miss. Tilly will be taking good care of Master Snape."

Hermione nodded her approval and took the cup of tea Tilly offered her. The china cup was a delicate creation with a chintz pattern as feminine as the pink flowers on Tilly's pillowcase. It was strange to think of Professor Snape owning something so frivolous, let alone using it for his own tea. Perhaps it was a family heirloom, a treasured teacup of his mother's. Although, the place seemed cluttered with possessions he didn't care to maintain, and Hermione did not think Professor Snape was a man given to sentimentality.

He did love Lily, though, or had loved her. When Harry had told Ron and Hermione about Snape's memories, Hermione had seen how hard it was for Harry to admit his most despised teacher was capable of loving someone and having friends. The idea wasn't that shocking to Hermione; she was sure there were a great many things they didn't know about their professors. Hadn't Dumbledore proven that?

But for Snape to do everything out of lost love for Harry's dead mother? The idea was inconceivable to her. People did many foolish things for love, but Hermione would never believe Snape capable of the same mistake. Prejudiced to his own detriment, perhaps, but not a lovesick idiot.

When Nestor made his way downstairs at last, Hermione thanked Tilly for the tea and followed Nettlebot into the sitting room.

"We can Floo back to the Ministry," Nestor explained as he searched for a tin or jar of Floo powder on the mantelpiece.

"Is Professor Snape going to be alright? I thought you had said that he was getting better after the attack." There was a shadow of blame in her tone, although she hadn't meant to sound accusing.

Nettlebot paused in his search and turned slowly to look at Hermione. "Severus Snape is dying. He has only months left, possibly six from what we can tell."

"And you can't do anything? There must be something in the Department of Mysteries that can help him." She was never very fond of Professor Snape; he had always been unfair and spiteful at Hogwarts, but she knew now that he was also capable of great courage and decency as well. To die alone and sick in this shabby, little house seemed a very cruel end to a man who had survived so much.

"Snape's illness has us baffled, Miss Granger. It is obvious that magic is responsible for his weakening condition, but this is magic we have been unable to identify. Professor Dumbledore seemed to have great faith that you hold the key to solving the mystery. His letter to me suggested that you brush up on your reading." He arched a questioning brow.

"Brush up on my reading?" Hermione repeated slowly. "Was that all he said?"

"Yes."

While Hermione mulled over Dumbledore's cryptic instructions, Nestor rummaged for the Floo powder, eventually finding it in an innocuous, if rather battered, Whittard tea tin. When they had both Flooed back to the Ministry, Nestor handed her a neatly rolled scroll from his limitless pocket of supplies.

"I don't want to rush you into a decision, Miss Granger, but please remember that his time is very limited. If you decide that you want to help, that scroll contains all the information you will need: contacts and possibilities we have already ruled out. Owl me when you have made up your mind."

"I'll be sure to give you my answer soon," Hermione promised.

"Thank you. It was a pleasure meeting you in person after everything we have heard about you, but I must be going." He jerked his head towards a growing flock of memos fluttering around his head and made an irritated snatch for one. He gave Hermione a parting, lopsided grin and walked briskly down the corridor. A flapping group of memos, much like the lime-green smoke from earlier in the day, was trailing in his wake.

Hermione secured the scroll inside her robes before moving towards the opposite hallway of outgoing Floo connections. It was gratifying to see all the constructive changes the Ministry of Magic had undergone since Voldemort's death. Wizards and witches crowded the hallways, and their confidence in the new Ministry was echoed in their smiling, busy bustling.

The atrium had been emptied of statues and banners except for a simple monument at the center of the room where the Fountain of Magical Brethren had once stood. Newly appointed Minister of Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt had ordered the war memorial to be erected the day after the Hogwarts victory, and months later, flowers and notes still appeared daily.

The monument was made of ten smooth walls, and in large words around the top was written, *To the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure ~Albus Dumbledore.* Hermione circled the memorial, reading the names of everyone who had lost their life in the fight against Voldemort. On the tenth side, topped by a statue of a phoenix with wings spread, was a list of the Order of Phoenix members who had died in the war. Dumbledore's name was the first engraved on the list. Beneath his name and right above Remus Lupin's, Hermione found Severus Snape's name.

A sudden, fierce hope gripped Hermione that Professor Snape would make a miraculous recovery and live to see his placement on the memorial. How livid he would be.

"People will think you very impertinent standing here with that Cheshire grin on your face, Miss Granger," Kingsley Shacklebolt said from behind her. He stopped by her side, arms clasped behind his back, and scanned the names. "Our victory was very costly."

Hermione nodded her agreement, and Shacklebolt turned his head to look at her. "I received an owl from Harry this morning."

"Minister?"

"He will begin work for the Auror Department next month."

"I haven't made a decision yet," Hermione replied to the question hidden in his statement, though he was regarding her with open frankness.

"You would make a wonderful addition to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. We need more witches and wizards like you and Mr. Potter. The Ministry already lost too many brave people to the war."

Shacklebolt's obvious sincerity was as important to Hermione as the opportunity to liberate oppressed magical creatures. The Ministry of Magic had been unstable since Hermione had been first introduced to the Wizarding world, filled with leaders who made poor decisions to further their own agendas. Shacklebolt had brought a much-needed stability to his post as Minister, and his decisions so far were sensible and impartial.

"Can I owl you with my decision next week? I'd like to hear from my parents first, and... something came up this morning." Hermione had meant to say that Nettlebot had spoken with her about a research project, but when she had opened her mouth, the words had rearranged themselves into the vague explanation she had given Kingsley. She hid her surprise in another perusal of the names etched on the war memorial.

So there were still machinations in the Ministry after all. Hermione was more curious that Kingsley didn't know about Severus Snape than that the Unspeakables were keeping information from the Minister.

Kingsley and Hermione were interrupted by a frazzled looking witch with a purple-plumed quill stuck into a teetering bun at the top of her head.

"The World Cup Quidditch delegates arrived early, Minister, and Mr. Bartlebee is threatening to release Hinkypunks into the bog again if a Ministry Official doesn't come out to fix the Muggle problem with his southern wards."

"Thank you, Miss Weston," Kingsley replied. His unruffled reply made Hermione smile, and she shook his offered hand in farewell, watching as he strode toward the lift with a fretful Miss Weston hovering at his elbow.

Prometheus Broken

Chapter 3 of 3

Magic can't fix everything, especially people. Hermione makes a visit and learns that some things might be broken forever, no matter how hard you try.

I own none of the places, characters, or ideas created by JK Rowling that appear in this story. I take credit for everything else.

A big thanks to Southern Witch, my beta, who read through this several times and did lots of hand holding so that this could be posted. Thanks to musedepandora, too.

Chapter 3- Prometheus Broken

Of all the transformations that had occurred after Voldemort's downfall, Hermione was most contented with the improvements made inside number twelve, Grimmauld Place. After two months of extensive magical and physical labor, including a lengthy consult in the Hogwarts library, the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black had at last been forced into submission. Even the infamous picture of Mrs. Black had been conquered, a process that had left Hermione as irritable as the portrait and had blasted a permanent scar on the wall.

Despite the difficulties, Grimmauld Place now utilized the best of wizard and Muggle conveniences. Electricity and magic worked side-by-side to the delight of Harry, Hermione, and an enthusiastic Mr. Weasley. It was also evident from the cozy atmosphere that pervaded each room that Harry had been thinking of the Burrow when directing the house renovations. Brightly colored window hangings had been paired with deep rugs, squashy chairs, and a collection of mythical-creature paintings that Luna had given Harry as a house warming present.

Hermione was currently established on the de-Puffskeined sofa in the first floor drawing room. A daunting pile of books, parchment, and two innocuous-looking folders were stacked haphazardly around her, but it was the determined expression on her face, in addition to the quill she had shoved hastily into her hair, that kept the other occupants in the room from disturbing her.

Crookshanks was purring contentedly by the fire in a wicker basket, watching George and Ron huddled around a table in one corner. The brothers were busy perfecting their latest line of products, which George had declared to Hermione would be more popular than Skiving Snackboxes.

"I think I'd rather not know," Hermione had replied succinctly.

Ron and George both seemed pleased to be working together, and that pleased Hermione, especially after the bout of prolonged gloominess that had descended on the Weasley family, particularly George, after Fred's death. So she wasn't going to quibble with either of them, no matter what suspicious noises came from the corner of the room. As long as they weren't experimenting on Hogwarts' first years again, it was better if she pretended that they were thoroughly engrossed in a game of wizard Chess instead of inventing the newest way to wreak maximum havoc on the world.

Whatever they were creating had Crookshanks supremely enthralled. Hermione had tried to tempt him away from the fire with a bit of tuna off her plate, but he kept his yellow eyes fixed steadily on Ron's and George's backs. She had given up on her ginger cat and had returned to the folder she was reading until Harry came into the room. Shoulders slumped and hair mussed, he sprawled in a chair next to Hermione. He threw a hand over his eyes and succumbed to a frustrated laugh that was the culmination of a thoroughly trying day.

"Alright, Harry?" Hermione asked. She closed her folder and set it next to her, giving Harry her entire attention.

Harry groaned. "Who knew the git would be as difficult dead as he was alive?"

Over the noise of a spirited tussle and flapping of wings in the corner, Ron asked breathlessly, "They still haven't figured out that portrait yet?"

"No," Harry replied in an uncharacteristically cross tone.

"I don't see why you would want him hanging up there anyway," George shouted over the din. "He'd only make everyone miserable." There was another desperate scuffle and whatever else George had said was lost to Harry and Hermione. A wooden chair fell over with a loud thud, and Crookshanks bolted from the room with an angry hiss, his bottlebrush tail bushier than ever. Identical shouts of victory came from George and Ron.

Harry lifted a brow in question, but shrugged and turned expectantly to Hermione. "Professor McGonagall said it was because he had abandoned his post as Headmaster

when the school was under attack."

Hermione could feel her cheeks grow instantly warm and busied herself with the tea tray that Kreacher had brought in just before Harry's arrival. "I don't know, Harry," she mused. "Are they sure the problem isn't with the painting itself? Lots of things can go wrong when you're making a magical portrait." Once she felt confident enough to meet Harry's eyes, she looked up to hand him a cup of tea with a teasing smile. "I suppose I shouldn't bother telling you that if you had read *Hogwarts, A History* you would already know that other Headmasters have been dismissed before."

The tension melted from Harry's face, and he took the offered tea with a lopsided grin. "You barely got Ron and me to sit our N.E.W.T.s early, Hermione. Besides, why should I read the book when you've already memorized it?"

"Exactly what I have been trying to tell her, Harry," George declared as he jumped over the back of the sofa to make a bouncy landing beside Hermione. He threw an arm over her shoulder. "You've got to convince her that she's destined to do research for the shop. Think of all the new products we could make with the books she's read."

"Loads," Harry agreed, a smile now fixed on his face.

"Not helping," Hermione countered in a sing-song voice.

George turned to Hermione with a grave expression, almost more disquieting than when he wore a look of mischief, but it was belied by the amusement shining clear in his eyes. "All that information is wasting away, unused, in your brain. Doesn't that bother you, Hermione?" He ruffled her hair zealously, and Hermione let out an exasperated huff that made Harry laugh from the safety of his chair.

"Shove off," Ron demanded, coming around to Hermione's other side. Once he had rescued Hermione from his brother and salvaged the quill hanging crookedly from behind her ear, Ron sat down and pressed a kiss to Hermione's cheek.

"Thank you, Ron," said Hermione in a dignified voice. She tried to tame her snarled hair even as she glowered at George, who grinned back unabashedly.

"Although, he does have a point," Ron announced. He pulled Hermione's folder out from underneath him and waved it in front of her. "What have you been looking at all night anyway? There's nothing you need to study for anymore."

"It's just something from the Ministry," Hermione replied hastily. She snatched the file from Ron and clutched it to her chest, but the gleam in George's eyes warned her that she had been too apparent. "I saw Kingsley today," she told Harry in a great rush. "He told me that you had owed him with your acceptance into the Auror Department."

"You didn't tell me you decided," Ron protested. All focus swiveled instantly to Harry.

There was an upset expression burgeoning across Ron's face, which Harry averted with a quick response. "You knew I was going to accept. I thought about waiting a bit longer to start training, but yesterday it felt like it was the right time. You and George are at the shop every day now, and Hermione was going to the Ministry to find out more about the Magical Creatures Department." Harry gave a helpless shrug. "I can't hide from the world forever."

The statement was morose, but Hermione could see contentment reflected in Harry's calm demeanor and lazy smile. She thought it was about time, too. With each passing year at Hogwarts, Hermione had watched Harry struggle with his increasing role in the war. He had sacrificed a carefree childhood to defeat Voldemort, and Hermione's greatest wish for Harry was that the coming years would give him the considerable happiness he deserved.

"I think it's brilliant," she said decisively. She bounded off the sofa to give Harry a warm hug that he returned.

"Thanks, Hermione."

"You're welcome," she told him, infusing her voice with all the sincerity she felt.

Harry startled when Hermione suddenly straightened up and spun on her heel to face the sofa in a swirl of robes and brown hair, wand drawn. Half out of his chair and reaching for his own wand, it wasn't until he saw the direction of Hermione's gaze that he slowly sank back down with a relieved huff.

The book George was thumbing through flew out of his hands to land neatly on top of the wobbling pile of Hermione's research material that she had summoned into her arms.

"What are you reading *Holidays with Hags* for?" asked George, who seemed genuinely puzzled instead of teasing.

"You kept that rubbish?" Ron demanded, incredulous.

"Just because he didn't actually do any of the things he claimed to do doesn't mean it's rubbish, Ronald. The information is still useful."

The haughty look on her face silenced any further objections that Harry was about to add. He leaned in to read the spines of the other books she was shifting in her arms. "*One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi? Magical Theory? Magical Drafts and Potions?*" Hermione, those are first- and second-year books." When it became apparent that she wasn't going to offer an explanation, he clarified, "The Ministry wants you to read those? For the Magical Creatures job?"

"Yes, it's for the Ministry," Hermione said. She was rather pleased with her airy reply and let it show as she moved toward the door with a smug expression on her face. "I'm off to bed. See you all in the morning?"

"A bit early for bed, isn't it?" Harry said.

"It's been a long day, and I have more reading to do." She offered Harry an impish grin from just outside the doorway. "Besides, I don't want to be around when George and Ron start recruiting test subjects for their latest invention." She darted down the hallway as fast as her teetering pile of books would allow, followed by a chorus of protests.

Several hours later, amidst a cover of boisterous laughter from the drawing room, Hermione crept unseen to the ground floor and gave a thick message to Pigwidgeon for delivery.

A letter from Nestor Nettlebot was waiting on Hermione's bedside table when she woke up the next morning. It was heavy with a strangely shaped object wrapped inside, and Hermione tore it open eagerly. A solid, metal key fell into her lap, followed by a sealed note. She rested the key and note on top of her leg, the cold of the metal seeping through her thin nightgown, and read the brief letter from Nettlebot.

After a rushed shower and breakfast, Hermione shouted a goodbye up the stairs, gave Crookshanks a passing pat on the head, and Flooed to Diagon Alley.

The main street was extraordinarily busy for the early hour. A few stores were still closed, although candlelight winked in all of the windows with the notable exception of Ollivander's. The shop had been boarded shut since the Ministry confiscated all his remaining wands after his death. Hermione had faithfully scanned the newspapers each morning for more information, but for once, even the *Daily Prophet* offered no rumors about the closed store.

Harry's picture waved at her from many windows as stores tried to make a profit off Harry's phenomenal popularity. Signs accompanied many of the photos, declaring, "Shop Where Harry Potter Shops." The pictures would have made Hermione smile...Harry had not been to many of the stores in several years, and he refused to go anywhere near Diagon Alley until he didn't have to see his face staring back at him...except that small placards in bold, black letters were posted next to each of Harry's pictures. The official looking signs announced, "No Death Eaters Served Here."

The shops meant it too.

Hermione had been appalled to read in *The Quibbler* of Stan Shunpike's ejection from Flourish & Blotts over a month ago. There had been a bit of a fray at the front door of the bookshop, and Aurors had arrived just in time to stop the swelling crowd from turning violent.

"But the Ministry cleared him," Hermione had whispered disapprovingly to Harry at breakfast. She looked at the picture of Stan Shunpike, head bandaged, walking out of St. Mungo's.

"Doesn't matter," Harry had muttered around a piece of toast. "People don't care that he was Imperiused. They care that he fought for Voldemort."

Gringotts Wizarding Bank remained the only establishment in Diagon Alley without any signs posted. The goblins paid little attention to what sort of wizard or witch you were so long as you gave them your gold.

Perhaps it was because she had no gold that the goblin Hermione handed her key and note to scowled so suspiciously at her. He made Hermione wait on a hard, wooden bench for half an hour while he consulted with several other goblins. Without apology, and with a great deal of hesitation, he at last handed Hermione a heavy bag that clinked and jingled when Hermione tucked it into her purse.

"We will owl you the rest," he told her gruffly.

Hermione's polite thank you was lost on the goblin as he took her through an imposing door and into a dimly lit hallway lined on both sides with doors. It was utterly silent apart from the clicking of Hermione's shoes on the marble floor. He stopped abruptly halfway down the corridor and used the key Hermione had given him to open one of the doors. The hinges creaked, and Hermione shivered at the eerie echo that reverberated through the gloomy hallway.

The goblin stayed outside the door as Hermione first peered into the shadows before moving just inside. The door led to a spacious room made too small by the numerous possessions crammed inside. Soaring stacks of boxes cast deep shadows, and whirls and clicking sounds came from several directions.

"You can take what you want, but you will have to leave a record at the front before you go." The goblin pushed the key into her hand, a grimace twisting his features. He hovered in the doorway, watching Hermione stare at the jumble of possessions, before he turned reluctantly and left Hermione alone in the room.

Dusty trunks were heaped in a towering pile one atop the other at the back of the room. Delicate, revolving objects were left in a disorderly mess outside of boxes, crowded between piles of broken books, rolled rugs, cauldrons, and ancient paintings.

Hermione bent to look at a collection of glass vials twinkling from an open box, but her eyes were caught by silver portrait frame lying face down on the floor. The protective glass had shattered on the ground, but the picture inside was unharmed. A younger Albus Dumbledore was staring up at her with a cheery smile. One arm was slung around the shoulders of a tall man who radiated tremendous self-assurance and ruthlessness. Hermione had never seen a picture of Grindelwald from before the years he had been a threat worthy of coverage in the *Daily Prophet*, but Harry's descriptions matched the wizard gazing at her from the photo. There was a mesmerizing quality to the man that overshadowed even Dumbledore.

A tremor twisted down Hermione's spine, and she carefully set the photo face down on a table.

She took a deep, steady breath before pulling a stack of badly damaged books towards her.

He was standing in a field of tall grass at the bottom of a gently sloping hill. Indigo flowers, nearly black, dotted the meadow, and he ran his fingers over the large, velvety petals. A warm wind was blowing from the south, rippling the grass and teasing strands of fine, black hair across his face. Severus wended upward in an unhurried, nearly carefree, pace. The sun was warm on his skin and turned the landscape a rich golden color, including the beckoning figure standing at the very top of the hill.

"Albus," Severus greeted. The older wizard wore bright yellow robes that dazzled Severus' eyes as they caught and billowed in the wind.

"Please," Dumbledore pleaded, holding out a flask of frothing, black liquid to Severus. The potion was a dreadful, ominous discord to the idyllic surrounding and cast a sharp line of shadow down Dumbledore's robes.

Severus stepped back, a wild, gyrating panic growing in his chest, but Albus only followed his retreat, straining forward. "You must take it. You must," he insisted.

The portentous oblivion radiating from the clear flask attracted and repulsed Severus, who retreated another half step while also leaning forward. And despite the violent terror that gripped him, he reached out and clasped the potion in his hand.

It turned dark.

He shivered in the cold while the potion bubbled and burned in his palm. Albus was in front of him, a beseeching expression still fixed on his face, but he was now slumped against a stone rampart. Fenrir Greyback was snarling on Severus' left, and to his right, Draco was stiff and pale, his wand trembling in his clenched hand.

"Please, Severus," Albus begged. Greyback gave a horrible, gruff laugh, and somewhere nearby, invisible in the darkness, Severus heard Harry Potter scream, "No!"

Lightning cut a hot, blinding tear through the black sky, and a taut stillness descended on the tower. Severus could hear the potion simmering in the flask and Albus' labored, raspy pants.

Everyone turned to stare at Severus.

"Please," Dumbledore implored, and although his tone was beseeching, there was an inflexible command behind the words. A quaver shook the old wizard, and the heavy, golden ring that he wore on his hand fell to the ground, clinking across the stones.

A brutal hatred flamed inside Severus. He brought the flask to his lips with a jerk and met Albus' unyielding blue eyes. He swallowed the potion. There was a flash of brilliant green as the bubbling liquid scorched and blistered his throat.

Fenrir howled victoriously as Albus fell motionless to the floor, but Severus paid little heed to the body prone on the flagstones. A sharp, fiery pain was ripping through his throat, and a sinuous form coiled tight around his body. He tried to scream but a tepid, metallic fluid was choking his mouth and pouring from his neck as everything around him shattered into a black, piercing nothing.

A serene stillness greeted him when he opened his eyes. Chest heaving, he looked and saw dingy bed hangings illuminated by yellow moonlight. He was in his bed, his nightshirt soaked with sweat. A breeze puffed through the open window and chilled his skin.

He shuddered and pulled a thin blanket up to his neck, but it did little to fend off the cold. A sigh parted his lips as he pressed a shaking hand to his throbbing throat, eyes squeezed shut against the darkness of the room.