

Signed, Sealed, and Delivered

by christev

Five years after Voldemort's demise, two very much changed battle veterans are reacquainted.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This is for my dear friend ApollinaV, who complained about her SSHG drawing that wasn't coming out the way she wanted. She wrote "They don't look right. I gave SS stubble just to make him look something like a man. Because he had girl-pretty eyes. And Hermione looks like a transgendered meth addict." I took her complaints as prompts and tried my best to squeeze them all into a story!

Signed, Sealed, Delivered

Five years had passed since Voldemort had gone down in flames, taking with him the Boy Who Lived and effectively extinguishing the hopes and plans many in the wizarding world had had for his future. Including Hermione Granger. She lost not only Harry, but also her other best friend, Ron, who was caught by a stray hex as he fought alongside Harry to the bitter end. Hermione, considered the brains of the Golden Trio, was inconsolable at the loss of her friends. Even after her release from St Mungo's, her depression remained with her, and she decided to leave the wizarding world in an attempt to escape the guilt of what she considered her failure to plan for every eventuality.

Hermione enrolled in university, finding some fulfillment in schoolwork and research. However much she tried to ignore and deny the trauma of the War, it wouldn't let her go, visiting her in her dreams. Those nights she didn't awake screaming were few. During her first year, she self-medicated, alternating sleeping pills with caffeine, switching to alcohol during the summer months. In her second year, a friend invited her to smoke some weed, telling her it would help her relax.

By the middle of her third year, she was expelled from university, a combination of missing classes and being caught with marijuana in her dorm room. She didn't really care that much about leaving; she was too relieved that her stash of crystal meth had been all used up at the time. Otherwise, she would have faced jail time.

Severus Snape figured five years was enough time for memories to fade enough that he wouldn't be immediately recognized in Knockturn Alley. Of course, his appearance had altered so much since he'd left Britain that he doubted he'd be easily spotted, not to mention the fact that most of the wizarding world thought him dead.

When he had woken up in the Hogwarts Infirmary, he feared the worst, figuring it was a grand cosmic joke that the afterlife would place him in a location which held almost nothing but bad memories for him. When Poppy and Minerva began fussing over him as if he were their long lost son, he began to realize that, against all probability, he had not only survived Nagini's bite, but Potter Potter, of all people had spread the news of his true loyalties to one and all. Poppy and Minerva clucked and hovered over him, fighting off tears on occasion as they remembered what they'd thought of him and said to him.

Once his recovery was complete shielded from any prying eyes by his two champions he decided the best course of action was to leave Hogwarts behind and test his fortune in other parts of the world. He cut his hair, dressed in Muggle clothes, and began an outdoor fitness routine that both developed his upper body musculature and got rid of the sickly pallor to his skin. He knew that women checked him out, although he believed that once they got a good look at his face, they immediately lost interest.

Five years later, using the excuse that only one apothecary in the world carried a certain ingredient for a potion he was developing, Severus found himself walking down Knockturn Alley. He was peering into the window of the apothecary, unconsciously stroking his unshaven chin, when a reflected movement caught his eye.

Spinning around, he grabbed the arm of the... witch? wizard? trying to reach into his pocket. A grimy face, half hidden by a cap, looked fearfully at him, and shoulders cringed in anticipation of being beaten or hexed. The eyes, once possibly beautiful brown, were glassy and appeared huge, surrounded by black rings and cheeks so sunken it was obvious chemical addiction was at play.

"What is the meaning of this? Trying for my coin purse, are you? On your best day, even clean and sober, you'd find yourself twitching at the end of my wand, trying to steal from me." He was fully prepared to continue berating the thief, had it not been for its gasp and shudder at his words.

"You! You can't be alive! I watched you die! I saw you dead on the floor! What ah!"

He grabbed the skinny wrist painfully hard and twisted it behind the thief a witch, if the voice was anything to go on.

"Who are you? What do you mean, you saw me die? Who do you think I am? Tell me!"

"I I. Professor? No one else sounds like you. Professor Snape? Am I dead, too?" The witch faltered, then as he watched, her eyes rolled back in her head, and she collapsed in a faint.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake!" Severus grabbed her arms and eased her to the ground. He removed her cap, and a mass of curly brown hair, dull and dirty, cascaded halfway down her back. He pushed it out of her face to get a better look at her, although his mind was beginning to fill in the pieces of her identity.

But what was Hermione Granger doing, thieving in Knockturn Alley, looking emaciated and strung out? Determined to get answers, he lifted her into his arms and Apparated.

Hermione regained consciousness to hear hushed voices.

"Well, obviously, she's starving and on drugs. It doesn't take a degree in medi-wizardry to know that much! She's lost so much weight I couldn't tell if she was a witch or a wizard when I first saw her. I want to know how she got there." From the sound of it, Snape was pacing the floor.

"But that's just it, Severus. We haven't seen or heard from her since the Final Battle. Several times that first year, I owled her, but after her first reply, I never received another response." Minerva sounded worried and sad. "Her parents decided to stay in Australia from the sound of it, relations between them were quite strained. She mentioned going to Muggle university, but I don't know if she ever followed through with that. It was so hard for her, what with losing both of her best friends..."

"Noooooooo!!!" Hermione's scream shocked everyone, herself included. "Harry! Ron! Nooo!!"

"Minerva, grab her arms! Severus, her head can you hold it still while I give her this potion? There!"

Poppy forced the Calming Draught down Hermione's throat. A moment later, a shaken but much calmer Hermione looked at the three faces studying her. She realized that she was dressed in soft clean robes and was the cleanest she'd been for months.

"Now, dear, can you tell us how you came to be wandering around Knockturn Alley in such a condition?"

"And just what has led you, the Pride of Gryffindor House, to take up a life of crime?"

"Severus! Don't you listen to him, Hermione; it's just a shock for us to find you in such a ... er... in very different circumstances than we would have imagined for you."

"Minerva, Poppy, Se er, Professor, I'll just get out of your way. Don't worry about me, and I'm sorry to have caused you trouble."

"Hermione, do you even have a wand? We didn't find one on you."

"Um, I might have sold it last week..."

"What!?"

Tearfully, Hermione began to recount the last five years of her life to the concerned witches and the rather put-out-looking wizard. She explained to them that after being kicked out of university she'd lived on the street for a while in London. But she ended up coming back to Diagon Alley because being homeless in the wizarding world was relatively safer than in the Muggle world. She was amazed to hear that her Potions Professor, whom she had believed dead, had in fact rescued her by bringing her to the same woman who had saved his life.

Poppy preened a little bit as Severus explained why he'd brought Hermione back to Hogwarts, at the same time keeping a sharp diagnostic eye on her newest charge. The meth addiction was the least of Hermione's worries. After a three day regime of potions, the substance would no longer be in her cells, eliminating the physiological addiction.

What Poppy couldn't treat was the underlying cause of Hermione's brokenness her depression and survivor's guilt. Strangely, Severus was the one who came up with a plan of action.

"What the girl needs is therapy."

Over some objections from Minerva ("Hermione's the most brilliant witch of her age. She'll be able to conquer this on her own."), it was determined that the young Gryffindor needed help of the kind Poppy was not able to provide. With much consternation, the two witches finally agreed that she would benefit from seeing one of those Muggle healers Severus talked about who didn't do much but talk to their patients. He didn't tell them that he'd taken advantage of this kind of treatment himself and could testify to its efficacy.

However, once the course of treatment was decided upon, it appeared up to Severus to put the plan into action.

"But Severus, you're the one who's been living like a Muggle. Surely you'd be able to find one of these healers and make sure Hermione goes there. The time will go by so fast; you'll barely know she's there."

Which is how, six months later, Hermione came to be reclining on the sofa (not the old ratty one, the new large cushy one he'd bought that last year he'd lived there) at Spinner's End, practically leaning completely up against him, flipping through an old potions periodical while he watched the telly.

"You're seriously buying a vowel?" He groused at the set. "What kind of dunderhead can't figure it out it's 'Leaving on a Jet Plane,' you absolute shite-for-brains!"

Hermione grinned, not sure which was more endearing, the fact that Severus was hooked on *Wheel of Fortune*, or that he knew all kinds of Muggle popular culture references. He'd been full of surprises in the months since she'd tried to pick his pocket.

After taking her to Hogwarts to take care of her physical addiction, he'd brought her back to his childhood home in Spinners End. He had insisted she sign a contract, in

which he would provide her with room and board and she would agree to follow his rules for her recovery. These rules included strict diet and exercise routines to return to a healthy physical state and intensive psychotherapy to heal her mental wounds. As she recovered, she would also do household chores and help him with his potion making and research as she was able. He required her to sign a wizard's oath to follow through with her responsibilities, and in return, he promised to protect her during her recovery period.

After the first awkward two weeks, the two of them had worked out a comfortable co-existence. Her initial hesitancy in staying with him at his home was overcome as she quickly became too busy to dwell on anything but her therapy sessions. After three months, her treatment eased from daily to twice weekly sessions, and she had some time to engage in 'normal' leisure time activities of reading and watching the telly.

"Budge up a bit, eh?"

Figuring she'd use his preoccupation with the show to snuggle up against him, she squirmed enough to insinuate herself so that he'd have to either put his arm around her or drape it against the back of the sofa.

"Miss Granger, if you think you're being sneaky, you're deceiving yourself. I'm only tolerating your behavior because I know you're mentally unstable... and because you cleaned the draperies today."

"Oh, Severus, you know my therapist said I needed to feel safe, and I do feel safe and protected when I'm near you."

"Hmph! I've sworn to protect you regardless of proximity three thousand dollar spot! Pick the D there are three of them! No, not a W! There are no Ws! Idiot."

"Severus, how appropriate: 'Signed, Sealed, Delivered, I'm Yours.'"

She twisted to smile up at him as he harrumphed again. Stretching up to give him a little peck on the cheek, she slid back into her comfortable position under his arm. He stilled for a moment.

"Yes, that's it, the Y!"

His focus back on the program, Hermione smiled to herself and turned her attention back to the article she'd been reading. 'Signed, sealed and delivered' was too true. She settled against him and felt his arm tighten almost imperceptibly around her. She was a patient witch. She could wait for 'yours.'

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Author's End Note: After reading this story, Apollina created this wonderful artwork. She also convinced me to post - she's fabulous!

