

Dream a Little Dream

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The imps - orange imps, acid-green imps, imps in eye-searing pink and blood red - cavort endlessly across the fronts of the boxes. Imp after imp after imp, each one changing color as it moves, each one making a different, almost-rude gesture, each one doing its part to help turn Weasleys' Patented Daydream Charms into one of the best-selling wizarding products ever manufactured.

You hate them.

You hate the imps, and you hate the Dream Charms, and you hate the fact that when your shop closes for the day, you know you are going to dream even without a charm.

You hate the shop, too, even though you dutifully open it every day and dutifully go through the obligatory joking with every customer, most of whom, you're convinced, come only to gawk at the remaining famous Weasley twin. You piously assure the determined Hermione and the awkward Ron and the intense Harry and your doting, oblivious parents and the desperately-needy Angelina and everyone else who keeps asking and keeps asking that you are fine.

You are fine, you are fine, you are fine. You are fine, and you are happy. You are fine, and you say that you are glad to run the shop in Fred's memory because Fred would have wanted you to, because the wizarding world needs its pleasures and its laughs now that Voldemort is finally dead. Voldemort is dead, and so is Fred, but you are fine. You are fine, damned fine, and you keep the shop in honour of Fred.

Except that it's all bollocks and bullshit. You keep the shop because no one bothers you there and because, when the last customer is gone and the last laugh is laughed, you can escape your shop and your life without even having to leave your back room.

You do not use the brightly-coloured Daydream Charms. You don't even use a spell, not anymore.

You used one the first time, of course: you waved your wand and spoke the words that took you out of your world and into another. But now you don't need the words; your mind takes you there on its own.

Your dream isn't a "day"dream at all - it's a dream for the night that comes even when the sun is shining, a dream for those dark, desperate watches when the people who no longer exist are somehow much more real than the people who do.

Of course you used Dark Arts to start your dream. The Weasley Twins didn't spend all that time experimenting with hexes and jinxes and charms without learning a thing or two beyond the Ministry-approved pap you were taught at Hogwarts.

But now you have a new understanding of these arts. They aren't evil, not unless you want them to be. They will be whatever you need. If you wanted them to comfort you, protect you, hide you - then that's what they do. If you want them to complete you, to give you a self you never had, they do that.

And if you want them to take you out of yourself completely, to help you make a DarkDream that will take you behind the veil, so that you can exchange the living for the

dead, so that maybe you can even bring the dead back...well. They can do that, too.

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You laugh with the customers, and you laugh at yourself for once having been silly enough to believe that you and Fred always knew where to draw the line - the line between expulsion and good standing at school, the line between trouble and Trouble at the Burrow, the line between light and dark anywhere.

You'd been a fool. A fool, and so had Fred. There are no lines, there are no good sides or bad sides.

There are only the things that get you through the night.

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You stand waiting to lock the door behind the last customer of the day, a blinking, bespectacled boy, probably about a third-year, who clutches his bag of Snapping Snarling Stickers as if they will really protect his possessions once he glues them on. As if they'll give him a fighting chance to be different, to be strong.

Yet there is no chance, and you know it. You know this kid - not his name, but his type. He is one of Nature's victims, and he can no more defend himself against the Twins and Marauders of the world than Fred could stand up to a collapsing wall.

But you joke with the kid anyway, give him your standard con-man patter - Weasley Wheezes will make you cool, make you fun, make you friends...

Lies, of course, but no worse than any of the other lies that life will tell the kid, lies like "some principles are worth dying for" and "the dead are in a better place."

Just when you think you've succeeded in urging the boy out the door, he turns back and bursts out, "I'm in Gryffindor, too!" You see now that he's been waiting to tell you this, screwing up his courage to unveil this connection, as if somehow this arbitrary link will let him suck some magic from you, let him be someone other than who he is, someone smarter, tougher, better.

You want to tell him that Gryffindor is the biggest lie of all, that "brave" is just another word for "dead," but you don't. Instead, you lean conspiratorially close to him and whisper, "Don't let the Headmistress catch you with those Puking Pastilles; you wouldn't want her to come in here and transfigure me into a pincushion!"

You watch as the boy half-grins, part of him sure you must be joking - *you* are George Weasley, after all - and part of him perfectly willing to believe that McGonagall would do just that. That she would find you out and change you.

You aren't even sure he's wrong. Oh, not about the pincushion. But about changing you. You remember how she acted when you saw her last month, at a memorial ceremony to honour the Hogwarts dead: she didn't smile when you told her how fine you were. And later you saw her watching you, frowning, thin-lipped. Unlike your family, she doesn't need you to be fine. Unlike your family, she can see you - can see *you*, not a replacement Fred. So she watched you and frowned.

You know you didn't fool her. But you don't give a damn.

You wink at the boy and shut the door smartly behind him.

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If anyone ever asked, you'd admit that you first experimented with the DarkDream because you wanted to talk to Fred once more. Just once more. That's all you wanted.

You knew there was - *there had* to be - some way for the living to reach the dead, and so you ventured into the twisted by-ways of the wizarding underworld, trying to find someone or something that would teach you how to cross that line between the realms. And on your anonymous forays into places that were dubious even by Knockturn Alley standards, you learnt that Harry's Resurrection Stone wasn't the only way to summon your dead. There were potions. And spells. And charms.

You avoided the potions altogether. You've never been good at them; they were Fred's department. But charms and spells...ah, they were yours. Weasley stocks-in-trade.

And so you bought ancient books and musty, brittle parchments, and you pieced out fragments of forgotten spells, and you worked harder than you ever had at school, and finally you had the result - a DarkDream Charm. Not "Patented," no - but it wasn't something you ever intended to sell.

You spoke the words, not sure what would happen, not knowing if you would live or die. Not caring. You even thought it might be fun to be dead. To sneak up behind Dead Fred and say, "Hem-hem, Gred, old boy. Guess who's been dying to see you?"

You raised your wand and spoke the spell.

You remember the room spinning, remember feeling your knees buckle, remember the cold edge of the flagstone as your face hit the ground. Remember opening your eyes to a dark, empty room.

There was no light, but you could see. And you could sense another presence. You were not alone.

"Fred?" you said, rather surprised that your voice still worked.

"What do you want, Weasley?" spit another voice in reply.

You knew that voice. At once.

It was not Fred.

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Your pitiful boy customer has left at last, and you have warded the door.

You retreat to your storeroom, sit in the armchair you keep there. You spend most nights in it.

You no longer speak your spell, but it doesn't matter, because you dream your dream no matter what. You slide easily into your netherworld.

But you're no longer looking for Fred.

You come for Him. For the Voice. For Severus Snape.

For the man who questions you, berates you, listens to you, demeans you, and ultimately, somehow, has come to depend on you, as you have on him.

You hate him. You hated him when you were a student because you didn't really understand him, and you hate him now because you do. And because he understands you.

Oh, you don't understand how you found him, or where it is you go, or why he is the only one who ever meets you in this shadowy afterlife. (A tiny voice sometimes whispers that you don't even know if he's real, but you rarely let yourself listen.)

Still, you understand what drives him. Even in this empty, lightless room, where you can see only nothingness, you can feel his need and yours. You are stuck in this anteroom to hell because you are alive and yet cannot really live without the presence of someone who is dead.

Snape is here because he is dead and yet cannot really die without the presence of someone who lives.

You don't know who that person is, the one Snape needs with a need that is almost palpable. You asked once, tentatively. You thought it must be Harry's mum - wasn't it for love of her that Snape had protected Harry, had served as a spy? That's what Harry said, anyway. That's what he'd seen in Snape's memories.

But if Harry's mum was already dead, then why wasn't Snape (dead as well) now reunited with her? So you asked about her.

And Snape had laughed.

He had laughed, gratingly, harshly, and said, "You're just as much of an idiot, Weasley, when you actually complete your own sentences as you were when you had your brother to finish the other half. If all you can do is show your ignorance, try keeping your mouth shut. You understand nothing of death."

And that's when you had known, somehow, that it was not Harry's mum that Snape wanted. It was someone else, someone still living.

You don't know who it is, because Snape is careful, always, to ask for news of any number of people: Slughorn and Flitwick and McGonagall and Goyle and Shacklebolt and every damned Malfoy and even, to your shock, Harry. It could be any one of them or none of them, but whoever it is, it is someone, and he is incomplete without them.

Just like you.

It's a weakness, you know, to need someone so desperately, to be so half a person without them. You're weak, but so is Snape, and between you, you can be almost whole again.

And if you occasionally touch yourself in the darkness while you listen to Snape's soft, insinuating voice, if you bring yourself to heart-pounding completion with his words and your hand, well, maybe you don't hate him so much after all. Not as much, anyway, as you often hate yourself.

Sometimes, whole days go by when you don't think of Fred.

Every night, after you close your shop, you dream your Dream. You enter your darkness. And you listen for your Voice.

"Weasley. What do you want?"

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