

# A Life of Dreaming

*by Ladymage Samiko*

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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Severus Snape had never once been tempted to gaze into the Mirror of Erised. What could it offer him, except hollow reflections of things that could never be? To see what he dreamt of in cold, unyielding glass with no hint...or hope...of reality would merely be an empty exercise.

What he had instead were his dreams.

For as far back as he could remember, Severus had always been a strong lucid dreamer. It was as though the universe were trying, in some wise, to make up for his bleak, miserable life by providing him with rich fantasy, a place he could visit with a mere shutting of his eyes and which, for those hours between bedtime and morning, was as tangible as the grey, resentful house he lived in the rest of the time. In his dreams, he read fascinating books, brewed brilliant potions, feasted on the finest dishes, and conversed with his ideals of friends and family. His dream-parents loved him, his dream-teachers cared about their intelligent pupil. As he grew older, and adolescence encroached on wistful childhood, these phantasms dissolved and coalesced into one perfect creature:

Lily.

The decades passed, and hopes flickered and died, but in his dreams she remained. Thousands of nights were spent talking to her, developing potions with her, walking with her, loving her. In his dreams, she loved him back. She understood and forgave. They touched, and he knew how she felt and how she tasted.

Sometimes, when he was particularly lonely...something he would never admit...there would be children. But when he woke, he would see Lily's eyes in Potter's face instead of one not unlike his own, and his temper would be particularly venomous.

As soon as he had the ability, he developed potions to strengthen his dreams even more and to control his means of sleeping and waking so that he would never be taken unawares by... certain people... in the real world.

For all those many years, it could be said that Severus Snape merely existed in the waking world. He lived in his dreams.

Until the world changed.

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It was the first dreamless sleep he could remember, and even before he opened his eyes on the waking world, he felt off-balance, uneasy. The light, too, was wrong; what seeped through his eyelids was far brighter than it ought to be. And he hurt. That in itself was nothing new, but he had an indescribably odd sort of headache to go along with the muted agony in his neck, and for long moments, he couldn't call up the memory. When the necessary pieces dropped into place, he lurched up...neck be

damned...in a panic, reaching for his wand.

Which was there already in his wand hand.

Someone had a hold of the other, and was tugging him back even as he tried to yank himself out of this strange bed. He fought, hauling the woman half across the bed and putting his wand to her temple before her appearance, and more importantly, her pleas calling him 'Professor' connected with the necessary synapses. He scowled, lowered his wand...slowly...and was about to growl, "Granger," when her hand flew up to cover his mouth.

"Please, please, don't talk," she begged. "You'll damage your vocal chords even more, and the Healers aren't sure they could fix it if you do."

The clues coalesced into a few deductions: the room was too sterile to be Hogwarts, so they were likely in St. Mungo's. Someone cared enough to see him alive and vocal, so he was likely with the Order, but whose side they thought he was on...and if they had won...remained to be seen. Granger was a bleeding heart at the best of times...and he remembered her, now, red-eyed and weepy behind Potter...so she could just as likely be looking after a prisoner as caring for a comrade, however loathsome the man in question might be. But he had his wand, so perhaps he wasn't considered an enemy.

She'd been holding his hand while he slept. He didn't know what to make of that, so he simply glared and grudgingly returned to what he found to be a lumpy mattress. Typical.

She smiled at him, but her lip was wobbly.

He glared some more, silently demanding an explanation. She understood, and slowly, she began to recount what had happened after he had been nearly killed.

Before the end, they both wept.

Exhaustion eventually won, and he slept again. Some time before that, she'd taken hold of his hand again and hadn't let it go. He didn't have the energy to pull them apart.

In his dreams, in which he had protected all of the tiresome little brats in his care, there was for the first time a little girl with curls the colour of coffee beans. Whether he noticed her or not is impossible to say.

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In the wizarding community, the winners celebrated and the losers suffered. Tragedies and victories alike played out while emotions ran high. Babies were made and suspected sympathisers were killed. Elation and grief went hand in hand.

Severus's hospital room was an oasis of serenity in comparison.

There were no visitors save Hermione, though she was careful to say there would be if he indicated who would be welcome. He did not. Instead, there were only regular visits from Healers much too old to have ever been his students. Hermione took care of matters in the intervals. (Including, he was mortified to suspect, his most personal needs whilst he had been in a coma.) She kept him apprised of the news and read to him from books he ticked off of a massive list she gave him.

She was very careful to leave every so often...sometimes for an hour, other times for hours on end or overnight...and to tell him precisely when she would return. He was equally careful to eradicate all traces of his emotions by the times she returned.

Frustration with his enforced invalidism and uncertain future...not to mention his inability to vocalise said frustration...exacerbated his temper. With a sense of courtesy no one would have attributed to him, he tried not to take it out on her, but a few spats were inevitable. Still, she kept returning. And she refrained from adding stinging nettle paste to his neck salve, which he might admit he deserved.

He did begin to notice the little girl in his dreams, poking her head 'round corners, carrying about a massive tortie cat, reading a book while perched in a certain tree by Hogwarts' lake. Dream- and waking-self merely shrugged; she was simply part of the environment, one more child among many, and he went back to his dream-life with Lily. But his lover was, he thought, a bit pale of late.

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His voice healed, and the venom dispersed from his system. While some things would never work in quite the same way anymore, that had been the case since he turned thirty-three and his arches began to complain, and the day came when he was cleared to go home. (A risible concept in his eyes. His house, which should really be disinfected by being boiled in oil and burnt to cinders, would have to do. It had a bed, at any rate, and security enough to keep a herd of the Lost Elephants of Denbigh at bay, should they choose to become Found.)

Hermione was there to say good-bye...or at least, that was what she meant whether she said it or not. Everyone was getting back to their lives, and she undoubtedly had calls on her time that didn't involve former professors. He certainly wanted nothing more to do with former students.

Unfortunately, his subconscious had other ideas: the fool girl kept popping up in his dream laboratory, or his dream library. Places where Lily was...and had always been...decidedly absent. Instead, Miss Granger was to be found curled up in a plush chair totally unlike the kind he dreamt of for himself or busy chopping whatever ingredients he needed for his experiments. Severus attributed her presence to his subconscious not wanting to let go of anyone who had actually been kind to him, whatever her motivations might have been.

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The world had changed, and yet it had not changed.

Even isolated as he was in Manchester, Severus heard of the repairs to Hogwarts, that it might be ready to receive another year of students. Magical children were still being born and still needed instruction, lest they eradicate the United Kingdom in their self-centred ignorance. He prodded his still-tender feelings on the subject and admitted to himself that he might have it in him to return to Hogwarts, but he would need to be asked...wanted...for he had otherwise fulfilled his purpose there. Still, inspired by their work, even at a distance, Severus gutted Spinner's End and set about making it his home. For good measure, he purchased the adjacent lots...nearly two decades of unspent, Lucius-negotiated salary being more than enough for land considered worth only a bit more than the spiders that infested the buildings...razed their miserable structures, and with few 'inspired' expressions of Malfoyan gratitude, created a potioneer's fantasy of a garden, complete with greenhouse. (The Malfoys could be very grateful when they discovered it wouldn't involve the proverbial pound of flesh, literally or otherwise.)

Elements of Spinner's End began to seep into his dreamscape...or had it been the other way around? Lily certainly seemed very much at home in his greenhouse, and he had to keep chasing that child out of the poisonous plants. Granger? She was where she always was: in his library. He had to keep evicting her from his chair.

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September arrived, and to his astonishment, Severus found himself opening both the month and a new life back at Hogwarts. Minerva had come to him at his home and in the course of long, healing conversations, reasoned him into allowing the school its choice of Headmasters, if not Potions Masters. They laid their hands upon the office door, and it opened for him. He accepted the invitation.

Granger had returned as well, which he would have expected if he'd given it a moment's thought. She beamed at him from the Gryffindor table for the entirety of the Welcoming Feast. But she had not chosen to be among the few supremely advanced students he tutored in Potions or Defense, so he saw little more of her for the first month, until one afternoon during his office hours when she knocked.

He knew who it was; he had not survived this long by neglecting basic precautions. Still, he welcomed a break from long hours of paperwork that had been shoved aside first by Albus and then, of necessity, by himself. He looked up from his desk.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" His eyebrow raised, inquiring but unwilling to deal with nonsense, though willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. She was looking more than a

little frazzled. Perhaps that was why her hair seemed even more out of control than he remembered it.

Having made up her mind, Hermione didn't prevaricate. "Professor Snape, may I do my work in here?"

Both eyebrows shot up. "I beg your pardon? Granger..." he intoned warningly.

"I know, but I can't get anything done anywhere else in the castle! If it's not people, it's owls. Classes keep a lid on it, but any other time... Professor, I've found boys in my bed...and let me assure you I didn't invite them there!" From the sound of it, boys were somewhere on par with bedbugs. Amusing as a sentiment, but incendiary as a reality.

"And you haven't come to me before?" His voice was low, a certain sign of his fury.

She waved it away. "I handled that. And I put the fear of God into the appropriate people to make sure it doesn't happen again...to anyone. But what is exhausting is trying to find a single place in this cursed castle where I can work without people trying to schmooze me, pump me, chat me up, or hurt me. I can't keep up the necessary wards for the length of time without them draining energy I need to get my schoolwork done. Professor, I didn't ask for this; I never wanted it. I just want to finish my school year in peace, take my NEWTs, and get on with it." Her eyes were pleading, no doubt remembering his scorn for Potter's celebrity. "This was the only place I could think of to go."

He scowled, masking the mental review he was performing of the castle, considering her options and alternatives. She could use the magical exercise of maintaining such wards, but he had to admit that at this time, it would be counterproductive. To his dismay, he came to the same conclusion: for the present, this was the safest, quietest place for her to work. It was certainly a situation which he would remedy as soon as possible, but for now...

"There is a table there, Miss Granger," he gestured with his quill. "There are tea things in that closet there. Get your tea from the elves; what is there is my personal brew. The shelf there has access to the library. You will touch nothing else in this office. You will disturb me only by opening and closing that door. Any infractions and you are barred, office hours be damned. Am I quite clear?"

Her smile was brilliant. "Yes, Professor, quite clear."

Up went the eyebrow again, and his lips quirked. "Am I not the headmaster?" he queried.

The mirth faded, and he could see memories in her mahogany eyes. "I remember you best as 'Professor,' sir. Would you really prefer 'Headmaster?'"

She knew too much, had spent too much time with him. "No," he sighed. "I would not."

She laid her hand over his own, and he scowled again at the familiarity. "I wouldn't either," she confided quietly. "Maybe... in a few years...?"

He removed his hand. "Work, Granger, or out."

Her smile this time was impish, as was her salute. "Yes, sir!"

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He addressed the problem before the school year was out, and she would have been safe anywhere she chose, but by then the habit was established. They worked quietly, several feet distant from each other. Eventually, there was conversation. By the time NEWTs were upon them, Severus had occasionally had difficulty discerning between discussions he'd had in reality with those he had in dreams. She was the same woman in both: warm, cautiously friendly, tempered by her war years into a sharply honed intelligence.

Forgiving. She never shied away from what either of them had done in the war. She knew the ghastly scars he hid behind his high collars and long sleeves; sometimes, their absence was the only definite marker between reality and dream. If he wasn't paying attention, he sometimes said more than he meant to in reality. Things he was only comfortable saying in his dreams.

She never seemed to mind.

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Graduation. Honours given and received. The Ministry ruthlessly barred from the proceedings; this was academic achievement, not political grandstanding. Students put away their school robes for the last time.

He saw...truly saw...Hermione in woman's robes for the first time.

She had grown, something he'd never noticed when one or the other of them was always seated; she'd become a tall, slim girl nearly of a height with him and possessed of slight, gentle curves that light summer robes made the most of. She'd cut her hair somewhat; the chestnut mass frothed around her head only as far as her chin and she kept it away from her face with a wide, brightly patterned cloth band. It brought her eyes to prominence, large and dark and knowing. Her skin... if he had articulated the colour, he might have called it black tea that was a third cream and glowing gold from a generous spoonful of honey. 'A pretty thing' would be his dispassionate assessment, but then she turned away from Madam Pince and smiled at him, and that vivacity infused her with beauty. Her eyes warmed, and then there were the broad, lush lips that shaped themselves just for him. For him.

She would leave Hogwarts a few hours later...after the appropriate farewells, of course...and then with a stabbing emptiness, he knew himself for an aging fool.

But what else was new? Besides, Severus always had his dreams.

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The dreamscape was vivid, infused with life, colour, energy, excitement.

It was devoid of Hermione.

She had moved on, Severus told himself, and that was only right. A young witch with the world ahead of her deserved far more than a scar-mangled, middle-aged, anti-social wreck, even in said wreck's dreams. That he missed the considerate heart that had remained at his bedside, the keen mind that had shared his afternoons, and the intoxicating form he had just discovered... That was neither here nor there, was it? He might feel that he had always deserved more than had been meted out to him, yet she was beyond even that.

Lily tried to tease and cajole him into a better humour. Incredulous, he saw her for what she was: a reflection of an adolescent's dream. Infuriated, he banished her from his dream, and in days to come, she did not return.

Neither did Hermione. Severus buried himself in the paperwork he detested to fill the gap in his waking hours, but in the fewer and fewer sleeping hours he allowed himself, he was at a loss to fill the growing, increasingly painful ache of her absence. Even the haven that Spinner's End had become did little to allay his feelings.

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Midsummer, and Severus found himself staring at his bathroom mirror. He grimaced, baring his crooked teeth, and as he had often before, chastised himself. "You" he told the mirror, "are an obsessive idiot, infatuated with a child. But then," and here his expression turned into a derisive sneer, "what else is there for you?" A woman? Not hardly; neither witch nor Muggle would give him a second glance, even if he knew where to look for one that might suit him. Family? They'd mutually disowned each other. There was the school, he supposed, but instead of the new start it had seemed in September, he now saw it as endless years of grey toil, not unlike the period between the wars. And those had been made bearable by the dreams which now seemed so hollow.

Dreams he was now about to immerse himself in. With a vicious smack, he extinguished the lights.

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Hermione dragged herself into bed, feeling so very glad to be home and in a bed that was properly hers. Travelling beyond the British Isles' borders was exhausting however you managed it, and hours and hours of planes and cars and whatnot had taken their toll. She was knackered. But it had been worth it to see her parents, now permanently ensconced in Australia, and Mum's extended family throughout the Caribbean. Two months she'd allotted for the trip, a well-deserved break from the wizarding world. But now she was back in England and ready to dig in and make a life for herself...after an equally well-deserved good night's sleep. Or perhaps two.

She didn't awaken until eight the next morning, and then it was a very rude awakening.

Mmm... so comfy, so nice and warm... so... hard...? Hermione jolted awake, terrified to find two anonymous, male arms wrapped around her and what was almost certainly a morning erection tucked in between her and an equally anonymous body. Screaming was her first instinct, as well as leaping out of bed, but deep breathing indicated that her... companion was asleep, and it might be to her advantage to keep him so. Instead, she attempted stealth, rolling over in order to see who exactly had ended up in her bed and would soon be missing a set of gonads. But as soon as she shifted, the arms tightened, and a voice spoke, pleading, "No, Hermione, please. Don't leave."

She knew that voice, and shock froze mind and body in place while he buried his face in her hair. Absurdly, the thought scrolled through her mind that she hoped he wouldn't suffocate himself doing that. Apparently not, for he began speaking again.

"I know you have a life, Hermione; I can't begrudge you that. But please, don't leave me alone here. I don't think I could bear it if you abandoned me again."

Something was decidedly odd, and perhaps her mind wasn't working properly after hours of travel and jet lag and so forth, but she couldn't put together what he was saying with any sense, or indeed, any plausible whys or hows of his being in her home and her bed. Hermione decided that practicality was the only real option at the present. "I at least need to get up, Professor," she said carefully, doing her best to keep her voice neutral. "I'll make you tea...or would you prefer coffee?"

He sighed, and his arms loosened their grip. "If you must, Hermione. And then perhaps we can continue our argument about shredded Gillyweed?"

She had never argued with him about Gillyweed, shredded or otherwise, but she was not about to say so. It was becoming more and more likely that for some reason...belated reaction to venom or anti-venom, a new curse, something...Professor Snape's mind was loosening its hold on what passed for magical reality. "Of course," she replied carefully and just as cautiously levered herself out of his embrace and her bed. "Let me get the water started."

"Mm. Tea's in the pantry between the wall and the Aga, if you recall."

"Of course," she repeated, though in her kitchen, the caddies were kept on the counter. Should it be reassuring that he didn't know the layout of her kitchen? Hermione glanced over to see if he was watching her, to discover that he was, to all appearances, asleep. Had he been asleep this whole time? Was he going back to sleep, seemingly over his anxiety? Bewildered, Hermione opted to visit the lav and then get the tea on as she'd promised. It might be better to let Professor Snape wake up of his own volition...wasn't that what they recommended for sleepwalkers?...and she might think better with a little caffeine boosting her neurons.

She gazed at his sleeping face with no little sympathy, and perhaps a frisson of attraction that she automatically quashed. Well, she'd figure it out later, when he was awake and perhaps able to explain himself.

But when she returned to the bedroom to check on him, her bed was as empty as if he had never been there in the first place.

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She had returned to his dreams, and he was hard-pressed to disguise his elation. For that matter, he reflected, there was no need for him to. A dream-Hermione was hardly likely to chastise him or embarrass him in front of everyone. Still, he avoided it for long hours, choosing instead to fall back on the comfortable formality of potioneering together; they each knew their tasks, and he could bask in her presence without the danger of becoming overwrought. Even in dreams, he didn't care to be demonstrative. She took the situation in good cheer, babbling a bit as though she, too, were glad to see him after her prolonged absence, discussing the merits of ingredients and mentioning some of the places she had been. Here, she had simply been away on a long vacation and hadn't realised that he'd not been told that she'd gone.

They were standing awkwardly in front of each other once they'd finished the potion. She'd tucked a stray bit of hair behind her ear, and that was the last straw for him. With totally uncharacteristic abandon, he swept her up and twirled her in the air. She whooped, first with surprise, then with an innocent glee that he was impossibly happy to see.

"Severus!" she exclaimed.

"Hermione." He lowered her to the ground, relishing the feel of her. "I've missed you."

She blushed. "I've missed you, too," she admitted. But she started to pull away from him.

"No, Hermione, please. Don't leave." She simply looked at him, her face sympathetic. "I know you have a life, Hermione," he continued. "I can't begrudge you that. But please, don't leave me alone here. I don't think I could bear it if you abandoned me again." Perhaps he could get on if she did, but to have this taste of her companionship only for her to disappear again... would trying be worth it?

"I at least need to get up, Professor," and suddenly they were sitting in his reading chair, with her perched on his lap. "I'll make you tea...or would you prefer coffee?" Her head tilted in that way she had when she was asking him a personal rather than professional question.

He had rather she remain in his arms, but even in such a minor situation, he couldn't hold her. ""If you must, Hermione. And then perhaps we can continue our argument about shredded Gillyweed?" They'd 'discussed' the efficacy of several methods while they brewed.

"Of course," and with a press of her hand against his arm, she rose. "Let me get the water started."

Tea did sound good, he had to admit. "Mm. Tea's in the pantry between the wall and the Aga, if you recall."

"Of course."

The rest of the dream was more vague than he was accustomed to. He had the impression that he'd followed her to the kitchen after a few minutes, but she was gone. A gaggle of children had taken shelter there instead after a rogue Hippogriff had begun rampaging across the countryside. The curly-haired child watched with solemn eyes as he brandished his wand with the panache of a magical Errol Flynn and dispatched the creature with less trouble than it would take to banish a garden gnome.

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Hermione brooded over her tea. This had been a strange morning, no doubt about that, and her first question was, naturally, to ask what in the hell had just happened. Clustered close behind it were others like what to do next and how she felt about it. First things first, she supposed. A review of the facts as she knew them.

She'd returned home and fallen asleep from exhaustion. Fact.

She'd awakened several hours later. Okay.

In her bed had been an aroused Severus Snape.

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But he hadn't been... amorous. No advances, verbal or physical. And he'd known who she was. He'd wanted her to stay, though his language had been a bit cryptic. But he'd vanished shortly after.

Had he been awake? Asleep? Cursed? Drunk?? (That last seemed impossible, but...) She dismissed Polyjuice; an imposter would have made an effort to... accomplish whatever it was he (she?) had in mind, and would not have been able to get through her wards.

Professor Snape had been aroused.

What would he look like? Had he been aroused by her or by a common male circumstance? (At the time, she'd tactfully ignored the boys' morning tents as they'd scurried out of the camping one.)

Had he been in his right mind or out of it?

Had he gone home and... Hermione couldn't think of the right word. Surely Professor Snape didn't 'wank,' and none of the synonyms seemed to fit either. But what would he look like if...when?... he did?

Was he in trouble?

Hermione resolved to find out, but ended up stymied by circumstances. She found she had no way to contact him directly...he had left Hogwarts for the holiday and not even an owl could locate him...and asking Professor McGonagall directly would bring up questions she didn't yet want to answer.

Perhaps she could tie him to the bed if he... appeared again.

O...kay. Moving on now.

Or not.

Oh, lord.

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If he had cared to quantify such things, Severus might have considered the past fortnight among the best he had ever known. His days were spent at Spinner's End, making further adjustments to the house and grounds as well as experimenting with various potions for no other reasons than his own whim and inspiration. His nights were occupied with Hermione. They talked and read and brewed. She convinced him to join her in a picnic at an ancient castle. He showed her the wonders of the flora to be found in a Norwegian fjord.

And when he heard, through various discreet sources, that she was doing well in her post-Hogwarts life, he was pleased. The pleasure might hold a drop of bittersweetness within it, but it was pleasure nonetheless, and his joys to date had been universally tainted by far worse.

The nights became more intimate, and he found himself deploring the direction his subconscious was taking, but he allowed it knowing that if he did not, his yearnings might very well destroy his precarious contentment or himself...or worse, turn outward and hurt Hermione. So he permitted himself to hold her dream-self, to accept her embraces, warm and spontaneous, to relax with her snuggling beside him. And she kissed him, kisses that lingered in the space between childish affection and womanly heat.

But it would go no farther. It was difficult to define the difference between his relationships with her and with Lily, and why the one was strictly constrained while the other had given him no qualms, but Severus felt in his gut that sex with a dream-Hermione would be too like raping a sleeping woman, giving him a knowledge and power that she did not share. He would have that knowledge every time he saw her...and he hoped that he would see her in his waking hours, that they were, perhaps, friends of a sort. It would poison whatever reality he could have with her.

Perhaps it was reasonable. Perhaps he was being over-scrupulous.

Perhaps he was simply pathetic.

Hermione spent that night reading to the children, and the little, dark-haired girl clambered into his lap and fell asleep listening.

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The next night was when everything changed.

The day had been spent in a frustrating to-and-fro in his head, as he decorated rooms and found himself wondering if perhaps Hermione would prefer this shade of blue or would like the table there. It was his home, damn it, and the most intimate relationship Hermione would ever have with it would be as honoured guest, and even that had about a snowflake's chance in an outer circle of Hell.

So when he arrived in his dreamscape, he was in a temper such that dream-Hermione attempted first to cajole and then to snap him out of it. When neither tack worked, her face assumed a very familiar expression of stubborn determination.

She marched up to him, slapped her hands to either side of his face, and kissed him in a manner totally unlike any she had yet granted him.

There was temper, a furious insistence on making an impression. There was a heat that shocked through him, racing through all the nerve ends he'd never yet discovered. When she opened her eyes, there was an intensity there, inches from his own, that told him he was the only person she was seeing...and wanting.

Helplessly, hungrily, he kissed her back, absorbing the feel of her mouth, electrified by individual fingers that now traced back and buried themselves in his hair. He pulled her to him, and there was every centimetre where her softer flesh moulded to his. By instinct rather than design, his lips travelled along her cheek and to her ear, seeking out the different textures and tastes, hunting for the places that made her melt or coo or gasp.

It was the sound of his name, over and over, in a breathy, rich chant, that brought him to his senses. He thrust her away firmly.

"No, Hermione. Not this. Not here."

"Professor... Severus," she protested, "What...?"

He shook his head. "I can't do this to you, Hermione. Not here, not like this. It isn't right."

"Severus Snape!" she exclaimed, and her expression was one of incredulity. "Do you tell me that you're having moral scruples? Now? After you've been in my bed every night for the last two weeks?"

"What the devil are you talking about, girl?" he demanded. Surely, he would remember that kind of dream, of all things.

She growled, or was it a groan? "Severus, I think you had better wake up this minute."

"Hermione?"

"I mean it. Wake up, Severus. Immediately. Or I will fetch a pitcher of ice water and dump it on you, even if I have to hunt you down in your own house after you disappear from mine." And with that, she vanished.

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The bed was soft, the dim light was beige-ish. The blanket was light, and the scent in the air was one he recognised from his dream: bergamot and clove, cucumber freshness, purifying sage, a hint of chocolate.

This was neither of Severus's bedrooms. His whole body tensed even as his eyes searched.

She was lying beside him, watching with her head propped on one hand.

"What am I doing here, Granger? Where is here?"

"Here is my bedroom; you've been sleeping in my bed, Goldilocks. As for why..." she shrugged, a slight smile playing about her lips. "I'm not the one with a penchant for spontaneous Apparition and talking in my sleep, Severus."

His face burned with mortification, and his mouth dried. "How much..." he croaked. He planted his hands, ready to lever himself upright and out of her bed...he'd Apparated into her bed...but was arrested by the hand she laid over his.

"How much did I hear? I don't know what you remember, but I think pretty near everything, judging from the flow of our conversation." He covered his face with his free hand, unable to look her in the eye after hearing that. She'd listened to the past that no one else knew, to his small, ridiculous ambitions... to the little words of endearment he'd never have dared to utter in real life. Had he kissed her when kissing her dream-self? Had she allowed it?

It was worse than being caught masturbating to her picture. She couldn't help but piece together the pathetic nature of his dreams. He'd begged her not to leave him. And while none of the dreams had been pornographic, it wouldn't take a great leap of logic for her to postulate that he might have sexual fantasies as well.

He was startled out of his humiliation by her rolling over, ending up flush against his side. Her hand was flat on his chest, and she planted the point of her chin somewhere between there and his shoulder. So close, and she was staring at him with those big, dark eyes. After that first glance, he shut his eyelids, willing certain parts of his anatomy to obey orders. She couldn't know the affect that had on him.

"I meant what I said... Severus," she said softly, and his name on her lips shivered through him. "I was awake when I said it."

"Pity," he snapped. "A bone to a dog pathetic enough to..." She dug her chin in, and he grimaced.

"Bollocks," she interjected flatly. "I don't do pity fucks, Severus. I'm nice, but not that nice."

He swallowed. "Who said anything about... urm, fucks?"

"You did," she shot back, "the first night I came back from my trip. Not verbally, but you were pressed against my arse. Fortunately, you said my name, or your arse would've been kicked from here to Antarctica. Now will you listen to what I'm saying?"

"Your interest was...is...flattering. And I'm honoured by your esteem. Honoured that you would trust me as far as you have, both in reality and in your dreams. I've gotten to know you as a man, Severus, and... I fancy what I've found." Her hand began massaging small circles where it lay on his chest.

His expression was sceptical, to say the least. "Impossible. I'm twice your age, ugly as sin, and I have the temper of a badger with footfuls of porcupine quills."

A mirroring eyebrow lifted on her face. "And if I said I apparently fancy old, ugly, cantankerous men? Especially when they're mature enough to see an intelligent woman as an attractive equal? When their temper gives me license to lose my own? And their exceptionally large, beaky nose inspires me with exceedingly lascivious thoughts of what it could accomplish when applied to my clitoris?" Snape swallowed convulsively, and she continued with a sigh, "Severus, give me credit for knowing my own mind, please. I'm not stupid enough to fall for the 'Do you want to die a virgin?' line, and I don't take this lightly. I think if I'm old enough to fight a war, I'm old enough to make these decisions, and war taught me that we have to seize these opportunities before they slip through our fingers."

Severus looked at the elfin face with its avid, old soul expression. She was right. She might have rotten taste in men (and now that he thought about it...), but she was right.

And bloody fuck! was she a bold minx. Her hand had slid down to his cock, and she'd taken the opportunity of his bemusement to slide along its pyjama-covered length firmly. A mangled sub-vocal leapt from his throat. His own hand shot down to grip her wrist, and she studied his face, waiting.

"I've waited a long time for this, girl. But some things should be done in a proper order." This time, she didn't object when he sat up, nor yet when he pulled her up as well. And then he kissed her, and it was past time for objections.

The initial touch was honey-warmth. They fumbled a bit, as new lovers do, trying to mesh independent instincts into something mutually pleasurable. Hermione pulled back a bit to mouth the tip of his nose, and with her recent words simmering somewhere in his brain, warmth flashed to liquid fire, and he surged forward, lips and tongue exploring, demanding, thrilling when she finally opened to him, doing her own share of exploring and demanding.

Hands. His hands were everywhere, frantic, scrabbling to somehow verify that she was here, real, present in his waking reality. Soft skin, ridged in places where she had scars, covered by a flimsy, silky thing that was neither the practical tee he might have expected nor the lacy bustier he might have fantasized. His hands slid over it from her waist to under her breasts, feeling the weight and heat there. Gently...ever so gently, for she had been hurt enough...he palmed them, flesh giving way and moulding, nipples asserting their presence. He pulled back, searching her eyes for... for anything that would imply his touch was unwelcome. Instead, he became aware of the rapidity of her chest's rise and fall, the intensity of her gaze. As soft and careful as himself, she lifted his hands from her, turned them palm up, and kissed the inside of his wrists.

It was an electrical jolt of lust... and something else, something more, that he couldn't quite define.

She laid his hands back on his lap and rose from the bed. He watched, silent, with only a tenuous hold on the knowledge that she wanted him. Pulling out her wand, she spoke a quiet spell that set the crystals that filled the Muggle light fixture to a soft glow that brought both of them into clarity. His instinct was to tell her to extinguish them, to allow him to hide his ugly features and numerous scars in the dimness of moonlight. But here was another crashing shock of reality: she could see him. She saw him and knew him, and yet the desire did not flee from her.

This was real. She wanted him.

For him, this was a mad sort of miracle. For her, probably a disastrous lapse of judgment. But he was mad...lonely? broken?...enough to accept the miracle. To watch avidly as she slid her night slip over her head and her knickers...a royal purple bright against her dark, cream-gold skin...down her legs.

She was his perfection.

She walked back to him...walked, not sashayed, nor glided, nor whatever that sinuous movement where hips seemed to be independent of body was called...and he could neither move nor speak as she attended to the buttons and ties of his nightwear with a dexterity that suggested to him that she had indeed been far more involved in his sickbed care than he was comfortable admitting. Long fingers she had, with the little callus bump of frequent quill use. And her breasts had dark, richly brown nipples and areolas. There was a little pudge about the stomach that was comfortable. And there were her thick, rampant curls that he believed had never seen a razor...or whatever it was women used.

He was as bare as she now, and he wondered what she made of the practical muscular build, the appalling collection of scars, the tan shadings he'd acquired working in his potions garden. The lines, the tracings of veins... perhaps he should merely be grateful that he did not (as yet) stoop, nor did he have a belly. But unable to look or ask, he pulled her close, laying his cheek against her stomach. He murmured a spell of his own.

"What was that?" She was curious; if there was a trace of suspicion in her, it did not bleed through.

"Contraceptive charm," he breathed across her skin.

Hermione began stroking his head. "Should I ask how you knew that one?" came the amused question.

He closed his eyes, dipped his head to see if he could feel her hairs tickling his chin. He breathed in the scent of her...and the hint of musk from between her legs. "I made certain everyone in Slytherin knew both spells," he replied, and somehow the exchange was reassuringly prosaic. "All too easy for man or woman to use a pregnancy to manipulate a partner. It doesn't hurt for it to be cast a few times in succession. And even if they aren't playing high-stakes games, teenagers are horny, careless, little beasts."

Severus pulled away a little, laid his hand against her stomach as the chain of thoughts moved logically onward. "It's an intoxicating idea," he said, incredulity shading his voice, "picturing you... I mean, my... but..." He stuttered to a stop.

"But it isn't practical," Hermione finished, lowering herself to her knees. She, too, looked a bit overwhelmed by the idea. "I'm not ready. We're not ready. We're just beginning, Severus. It's a another conversation for another time." Her head tilted, bird-like. "But I think it's time for another sort of conversation altogether, don't you?"

"I do." They reached for each other and kissed once again. For Severus, it had been so long that it felt the work of a moment for him to simply want to take. To take and take again, as furiously as his body could manage, until he was sated and she begged him for mercy. No. No, he didn't want begging. Nor did he want to use her like a whore who had already been paid for the service. No, tonight was about her, about making her feel loved and desired and fulfilled. This was a proving ground, his chance at maybe, just maybe, keeping the miracle. If he wanted quick and hard, his own bed and a little book of solo spells awaited him at home. Here, he needed to prove he could make love.

But a little force, a little strength were not bad things. He hooked his arms around her and pulled her up onto the bed, laying them both out. She gave a breathless, little whoop at the sudden dislocation and chuckled. He grinned, but that was as much time as either of them wanted to spare before their lips met again. He began to roam, drifting over to softly nip at her earlobe, lining tiny kisses along her neck to her collarbone. From there to her shoulder, noting in his mind where he was when her tiny gasps reached his ears. He might revisit later on. In the meantime, he began licking her breast in broad sweeps like a cat's, avoiding the most sensitive region in favour of tasting, massaging. He switched to the other, at this point highly in favour of symmetrical treatment. Although resting on one hand, the other stroked along her hips and upper thighs.

"Severus..." she breathed, and he glanced up to eyes that seemed almost as black as his as she watched him. "Nipples, Severus. Please."

He paused for a moment, hyper-aware of everything that was her: the rapid rise and fall as she breathed, the want in her face, how her skin felt against his, so many tiny things that registered over all his senses. "Of course, my lady," he whispered back, and covered one with his mouth, licking the nub, teasing it with the tip of his tongue. She moaned, her fingers coming to tangle in his hair, and he was pleased. His own fingers slid between her thighs, petting and cupping her sex, delighting in the feel of its warmth and fascinated by the wire texture of her hair, before slipping a finger between her labia, sliding it forward through the wetness there until a strangled yelp and a full body jerk signalled his arrival at her clitoris. Motionless pressure, allowing her to move against it as she would, while he blew air across her soaked nipple and switched to the other. She yelped again, and her hips pressed and swivelled against the finger that now added a back and forth, side to side, seeking out what pleased her best.

He continued plying her with hand and tongue, eventually dipping inside just as she arched off the bed in climax, her passage gripping and rippling around his fingers. As it subsided, she relaxed once more and smiled at him with a feline smugness in her satisfaction. She looked so replete that he was astonished when, in a lightning move, she surged up from the bed and over, straddling his abdomen. "Gotcha," she said gleefully and planted an elbow on either side of his head so she could kiss him. The tips of her nipples brushed his skin, and she moaned into his mouth.

"Hermione..."

Slowly, carefully, she nudged herself downward, until she was sliding her pussy along her goal. Hermione nibbled and nipped along the way and made her own experiments with his nipples that brought out strangled gasps. This was not going quite as he'd planned, but Severus could no more bring himself to object than he could wish himself out of this bed and back into his own solitary one. Back and forth she went, slickness coating every millimetre of his cock: his pre-come and her own thick honey. Madness, came the dim thought. This was madness. Hallucination, or a succubus sent to destroy him. A phantom. A dream so deep that he could no longer recognise true reality.

For nothing could ever feel this intense, this heart-breakingly joyous. Not in reality.

On her face were a thousand variations of passion, and he found he could not catalogue them all; he could merely refuse to look away from her dark eyes, flushed lips, and frantic hair. He could drink in every millisecond as arid ground drinks in drops of moisture and hoard it in his mind against the certain day when a Penseive would be his only and best consolation. It would be a proof he could not deny: she desired me...perhaps even loved me...once. But it was not that day, and these thoughts, habitual though they were, fled. Hermione threw her head back, cried out another climax, and before he had a chance to move...to steady her, maybe, or lower her back to the bed...she took him in hand and sank down onto his penis.

His hips snapped up in reaction, driving himself deeper into her, and she made another little oop sound as she had earlier. Her eyes went wide, and she stilled; only her chest moved with her rapid breathing.

"Are you all right?" he asked quietly. Had she been a virgin? Had he asked?

She nodded feverishly, curls flying. "Amazing," she confirmed. "Gods, Severus... you feel... marvellous." A thrill of pleasure swept through him, and he lifted a hand to caress her cheek.

"Hermione... will you kiss me again?"

"Whenever you wish," she promised and leaned forward. She began to move against him, and he matched her rhythm. And in the time that followed, he learned that reality could surpass anything he could ever dream.

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Morning brought a flood of light in through Hermione's bedroom windows at a disgustingly early hour of the morning, making Severus want to hiss at the sun like a vampire. But doing that in front of his young lover would be a thoroughly embarrassing thing to do, not to mention a bit rude; he was in her home, after all, enjoying her... hospitality. And it had been... impossible.

He turned his head to see Hermione watching him. "Any dreams?" she asked.

He shook his head. "You?"

She shrugged. "The usual rubbish."

"Are you... well, Hermione?"

"I don't have any regrets, if that's what you're asking. Severus." She insinuated herself into his arms. "In fact, I feel quite... well, if that's how you want to put it. More than

well."

"This world has far better options than me for you. Certainly younger."

Hermione sighed. "Severus, I chose you. I fell in love with you. We had this conversation last night. I'll keep having it as many times as it takes to convince you, but let me tell you that until they make you in a younger model, I'm not going to give up a man I love more than anything for a man I merely like just because his birthday's a little closer to mine. So if it makes you feel better, brew up some youth potions and go in for some face-altering spells. Create a new Philosopher's Stone. But you're not getting rid of me now, buster."

"Buster'?"

"That's right." She grinned. Her fingers walked their way down his torso. "Buster. I enjoyed last night immensely. I'd quite like to repeat the experience. Several times. With an option for several months' worth. Quite possibly several years. If you perfect that Stone, I think the rest of eternity's an possibility, too."

He groaned, part drama, part lust as her fingers began manipulating his foreskin. "I was right; you're all horny little buggers."

"Nope, but I'll think about it if you're keen on the idea." She smirked, sliding down to add her mouth to her current activities, missing his incredulous stare. She might be inexperienced, but...Mother of Merlin! Do that again!...she was better read than he had ever imagined.

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"Do you still dream, Severus?" Hermione asked this question over two years later, while they were in his garden, snipping bitefrost leaves for a warming potion.

He paused, straightening. "I do," he said finally.

"About me?"

He smirked. "Often. I get my best ideas when I dream."

His expression left her in no doubt as to the bent of those ideas. Hermione put on a pout. "No fair," she complained. "Then you get twice as much sex as I do!" This prompted a rich sounding of laughter, which made her smile; she loved to hear her man laugh, loved to make such a disciplined man so happy he couldn't help it.

"Do you not prefer the benefit of perfected technique?" he teased. There followed a bee-filled silence, and he gazed at her thoughtfully. So beautiful, his Hermione, arms bare in the summer light, her skin a glowing, darkened gold, watching him with her affection clear to anyone with eyes to see. He'd shared so much with her, freely and with never a regret. His dreams had brought him to her at a time when he thought he'd have to live without her. It seemed a shame that she could not share this other half of his life, a half which, unlike his waking one, had nothing in it of which he was ashamed. "Hermione?"

"Hm?" She looked down to harvest a few more leaves, but glanced over again.

"Hermione," he repeated, "will you marry me?" It wasn't the elaborate ritual he had occasionally conceived when he dreamt of such a selfish, incredible future, but somehow, it felt right. When she smiled, he thought he might just have gotten it right.

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Much later, they had to treat some very random and uncomfortable places for bitefrost burns. Severus didn't mind; it had been worth it. He didn't ask, but he rather thought Hermione agreed.

That night, he dreamed of relaxing along a couch in his...their...Hogwarts library, Hermione snuggled beside him, listening to him read. The door opened, but he was unusually unconcerned and continued reading.

The little girl, who had threaded her way through his dreams for the past three years, padded up to him, stuffed dragon in hand. For the first time, she spoke:

"It was about time, Father."

Severus's voice dried up to a croak, and he stared as she clambered up on top of him.

Just as well he was marrying Hermione, then, he thought dazedly, but as he chivvied his fiancée into taking a pregnancy test early the next morning, he resolved to make a serious attempt to bring Hermione into his dreams. It really wasn't fair for the father to know everything before the mother did.

And he'd have to see about finding that tortoiseshell Kneazle. And a stuffed dragon. He doubted she'd let him forget the dragon.

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ANs: The original prompt from [lenaa1987](#) was this: *Apparation is all about 'Destination, Determination and Deliberation'. One Professor has been having very vivid dreams about a former student so vivid, in fact, that he manages to wake up in the middle of the night in a strange bed with a very familiar woman. I enjoyed thrashing out what it would take to pull Snape so strongly and how his dreams were so different as to make the apparition possible.*

The 'Lost Elephants of Denbigh' is a poem by Les Barker, recorded by the former Archbishop of Canterbury. (see youtube)