

Starry, Starry Night

by snapesbeatrice

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One

Chapter 1 of 1

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A warm, gentle breeze cut across the lake the last night before the students' arrival, carrying with it scents of grass and heather from the surrounding mountains.

Several staff members who normally commuted decided to stay after dinner to work late in their classrooms, planning for a more relaxed work day before the Welcoming Feast. Those who lived in the castle had carried out additional duties throughout the summer, so most had classroom preparatory work awaiting them.

Pomona and Hagrid took advantage of the late northern light to work outside. Filius finished his third review of a new Charms textbook, and Madam Pomfrey continued stocking infirmary supplies. Minerva had spent the better part of the day working on administrative details with the Headmaster, who left for the Ministry immediately after dinner. It was supposed he had a Board of Governors meeting to finalize the controversial appointment of Alastair Moody as DADA instructor.

With the Potions curriculum, lab and storerooms down to a science, Severus was finished except for some time-sensitive supplies due to arrive the next morning. Magical sorting would make that quick work. He returned to his lab to check on a few potions for Pomfrey, then retired to his quarters. Pouring himself a glass of port, he settled into his leather chair, feet up on a hassock, for a pleasant evening of reading.

Nervously excited about her first year of teaching, Nadia reported to her first-floor classroom to continue preparing for the two Muggle Studies courses. She had initially anticipated the introductory course to be the easiest, but soon realized teaching the basics would be the most challenging. It would be entirely new information to the purebloods and many of the half-bloods, some of them having absolutely no experience with the Muggle world. Remembering that there are many learning styles, she made notes as she thought of different approaches to take.

The clock striking nine signaled to Severus that it was time to find his bride of just five weeks. This was the last night for the next ten months that they could reside together without risk of discovery. He snapped close the book, Evanescoed the glass, and pulled on his robe as he stepped to the door. A thought made him pause. After a few moments in the bedroom, he left the dungeons.

He found Nadia scribbling on a parchment, several dried parchments stacked and set to one side. Her classroom was neat and orderly, a selection of supplemental resource materials filling a bookcase. Unheard and unseen, he walked over to inspect the books, a long finger brushing along the spines. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips as he realized she'd arranged the books according to the Dewey Decimal System.

"How very Muggle of you, my dear."

His velvety voice caused Nadia to jump.

"Why, hello. What's so 'very Muggle'?"

"Your book-filing system. It will be completely lost on the purebloods, you know."

Nadia smiled smugly, setting aside her quill. "Well. Being inferior at something will be a bit of a blow, I suppose."

He returned the smile, but with a brow raised warningly. Her Death Eater husband had harped on her throughout the past month about using care in teaching what was a touchy subject even in the best of times. Their eyes met, and she nodded slightly, acknowledging his reminder.

"And what have you been doing while I've slaved away?" she asked, shuffling the parchments. Pulling open a drawer, she placed them inside, magically locking the desk with her wand.

"Reading and drinking port: *Otium cum dignitate*."

It took her a few moments to put together the Latin. Meanwhile, he reached inside his robes, extracting her cloak, which he'd magically shrunk for transport.

"I thought you might enjoy a walk in the moonlight," he suggested.

Once out of sight from the castle, he took her hand, leading her toward a far meadow overlooking the lake. The moon was in its third quarter, brightening the cloudless sky around it to a rich indigo blue, and the white light reflected hazily on the lake's surface. In the distance, splashing and a faint, unpleasant screeching could be heard. Nadia looked at her husband questioningly.

"Mermish. Some of the merfolk are at the surface," he explained.

Severus had also hidden within his robes a magically compressed blanket and two pillows. Releasing them to full size, he spread the blanket on a slight incline and tossed down the pillows. Taking his wife's hand, he eased her down onto the tightly woven wool, then joined her. Shaking back his lank black hair, he stretched both of his long legs, crossing them at the ankles. In invitation, he reached out his left arm, allowing Nadia to lie against him. His arm casually draped around her, his ring and index fingers idly brushing the bend of her elbow.

"Can you safely cast a Warming Charm on yourself?" he asked sardonically, only half-joking.

"Ah, Felix taught me last winter, but I'm a bit rusty. Perhaps I could practice on you?" she whispered, cuddling next to him.

He snorted lightly. "Tell me when you become cold. I shall give you a refresher course." He wrapped his left arm around her, keeping his wand hand free. The Forbidden Forest was a distance away, but it always was wise to be attentive and prepared.

They rested in comfortable silence, watching the stars strengthen. An occasional owl, out hunting for a meal, moved swiftly through the wide horizon, and then the night again was theirs alone.

After about half an hour, the heavens seemed awash with crystal-like stars. The stellar arch of the Milky Way twinkled brightly as they lay watching, Severus mentally noting the seasonal changes, Nadia in awe of the natural wonder.

"I remember on hot summer nights, lying on the lawn with friends, looking for the constellations or trying to count all of the stars," she murmured. "It seemed that if we stayed out long enough, looked hard enough, the stars would come right down to us, that we could hold them in our hands."

He turned his head to look at his wife. Her long coppery tresses glowed faintly in the lunar light, which softly highlighted the silhouette of her dark lashes, gently turned nose, and full lips. As she nestled against his chest, Severus looked back at the moon, whose gentle glow alleviated the harshness of his hooked nose and angular face.

"My mother told a story on such nights as this," he began.

"Long ago, there was a wizard who fell in love with a Muggle woman. She was a great beauty who drew the attention of men far and wide, wizard and Muggle alike. Her father was prosperous and expected her to make a good marriage that would better her own station as well as her family's.

"The wizard was young and poor, with no prospects. But with his parents' blessing, he had sought the wisest and most skillful wizards in the islands. In exchange for his hard work, they taught him the secrets of their magic. He had grown to be a powerful wizard, although that fact was unknown.

"It was difficult for the beautiful young woman to choose from among her suitors. Some were rich, some were talented, some respected. So her father devised an invitation and a test.

"Let all of the men who wish to marry my daughter gather at my estate in a fortnight. And when they come that night, each is to present to her his most precious gift. In this way, she will choose whom she will marry."

"So all of the men vying for her hand thought long and hard about what gifts they could offer that would win her acceptance. Those who were rich searched their families' jewelry boxes for the rarest and most valuable items. The talented set to work to create gifts that would capture her imagination. The respected used their influence to seek and purchase unusual objects.

"The young wizard had none of those resources. Nonetheless, he decided to go to her home on the designated night.

"Standing on the outskirts, he watched as the rich presented precious rings, broaches, and other baubles. The talented brought forth carved chests, marble statues, and fancy-trimmed clothing. The respected revealed precious spices, Far Eastern goods, rare beasts, and valuable books.

"When they were finished, there were piles of expensive gifts in the courtyard. But still the young beauty could not choose. 'Is there no man alive who is worthy of my daughter?' her father asked in despair.

"Then the young wizard stepped forward. He wore simple clothing made of rough cloth and lacked the adornments the other men had. When he stood humbly before her, the wizard pulled out his wand, holding it in both palms.

"My lady," said he, "I do not have wealth, nor great manual skills, nor the ears of great men. I can offer you very little."

"And with that, the young wizard took up his wand, stretched it to the night sky, and captured the Milky Way, which he brought down, creating a brilliant, glittering band that he draped around his beloved's neck. 'I give to you this, my heart, my soul, and my promise to always care for you,' he said.

"The young woman knew then that the love he showed would sustain them through all of life's trials, and her father knew he would provide and care for her like no other could. They were wed the next day and lived happily ever after."

"Mmm," Nadia responded, a smile evident in her voice. "That's a sweet fairy tale."

Shifting her onto the blanket, Severus sat up and extended his ebony wand to the heavens. A creamy white light spilled forth and twisted into a rope as it sped upward, then curled around the distant galaxies. A shake, twist and muttered charm brought down what appeared to be glittering stars, which he circled around the neck of his amazed wife.

"I cannot give you a starry necklace that will last more than one night, but I can and do offer you my heart," Severus said as he looked down at Nadia with hooded eyes, his thumb brushing her cheeks.

There was a slight heat where the tiny, sparkling orbs touched her skin, and they remained there as she and Severus made love beneath the moon and remaining stars.

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Author's note: *Otium cum dignitate* means "Leisure with dignity."