

Stargazing

by karelia

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Disclaimer: No matter which spell I try, the characters still aren't mine.

His eyes moved swiftly across the pages, racing against the leisurely descending dark, until finally, he threw the book down the moment he'd ingested the last word. So much for American literature, he thought with disdain, irritated at having wasted hours reading *Song of the Lark*, annoyed that he'd given in to Narcissa's high praise of the book despite her absence.

At least now the damn book was done. A feeling of finality washed over him. Book done, Cissy no longer at his side. Snape allowed a sigh to escape. It had been good while it'd lasted. He'd known from the start she would return to Lucius eventually, but he hadn't been too proud to take what he could get. And it had been worth it. He felt like a man: appreciated and wanted, desired even. A real human-being made of flesh, capable of feeling physical pleasure rather than pain, an entirely new sensation and one he'd be forever grateful to Narcissa for invoking it. She'd never claimed to love him, but she'd accepted him as he was and appreciated what he'd offered.

His eyes rested on the body of water in front of him. *Who'd have thought the Danube would be this murky...*

Suddenly overcome with an acute need to be alone, he finished the last of his Turkish coffee...it had been too hard to procure some of the precious black liquid *without* sugar to waste even a drop of it...and stood. A walk along the banks of the river sounded attractive now that the setting sun reflected in the muddy water like an ethereal ruby, drowning the day's heat in it.

Fast strides brought him onto the rubble that formed the bank of the majestic river making its way unerringly to the Black Sea, but as soon as he reached it, he slowed down, pondering the bizarre beauty of the place.

The minarets, all sparkling white, offered a stark contrast against the deep-blue sky until one noticed the only church where a vicious, barking dog's greeting ensured not too many worshippers. The town of Ruse being far closer to Romania than Turkey, he was surprised that the majority of its Muggle inhabitants followed Islam rather than Orthodox Christianity like most of Bulgaria. It certainly made for interesting architecture, and he enjoyed the buildings and their rich history. The church, with its imposing bell tower, was close to four hundred years old, and it was one of the newer buildings.

The town itself wasn't large at all; it had the air of a village grown out of bounds. Most of the business came from merchants and exporters travelling down the river, and the Muggle and wizarding communities lived peacefully together, a trait entirely unknown in Britain, even nearly fifteen years after the war. Muggles still lived in the mundane places, and wizards continued to seek out wizarding areas. No wonder Krum had refused every single offer to settle in England no matter how profitable; life was so much easier here in Bulgaria, its pace far slower than in the West.

The shadows were growing longer, and the ruby reflection paled at a slow yet inevitable pace. The barges were moored for the night, and candles cast a soft light through their portholes. It was time to get away from the river; his feet were rug-burnt from the rubble of the many pointy pebbles that formed the bank.

Thankfully, the summery weather allowed for walking barefoot, and as soon as he reached the edge of the bank, his shoes and socks came off in favour of enjoying the soft ground of the deciduous wood that greeted him on the perimeter of the town.

Once he'd left the village lights behind, Snape dared look up at the sky. An array of bright dots greeted him. He scoffed at the sight of Sirius, the Dog Star, though only marginally; Narcissa had mellowed him. The sight was splendid: the Milky Way showed its milky, almost opaque path from the horizon moving starkly upward. Then there was the constellation of Orion's Belt, which outshone every other light in the starry sky.

A voice diverted his attention. "No, dear, really. I like you, but, you know, not that way..." A distinctively English voice. He rolled his eyes *Can't I get away ever???*

"Okay, okay! I understand." It was spoken in the harsh accent of the locals. Some dry leaves were ruffled; a few branches creaked from the hurried exit of someone.

Then, all was quiet again.

Snape found a grassy spot in a clearing and sat down to admire the sky, to contemplate life, to appreciate solitude. Another two weeks, and he'd be back at Hogwarts teaching dunderheads, the number of which had been growing exponentially since the Dark Lord's fall, not least because the entire wizarding world appeared to be breeding like rabbits. From what he'd just overheard, Bulgarians had a similar agenda.

"No, dear, really. I like you, but, you know, not that way..." Hermione said, fending off Viktor's hands with force.

He withdrew instantly. "Okay, okay! I understand." His harsh accent lent his words an air of the typical macho-born superiority that men from Eastern countries seemed to inherit from generations of patriarchal doctrine. He turned, ruffling dry leaves and creaking, even breaking, low-hanging branches, which interrupted the blissful peace of the forest at this late hour.

Hermione sighed inwardly as her eyes followed his form. "I'm sorry," she whispered, perfectly aware he was too far away already to hear.

"Why, oh, why..." she groaned, her eyes moving upward. The sight of the sky distracted her from her dilemma with the male species. Gazing at the stars seemed an apt diversion, and she looked around, making out a clearing nearby. Hopefully, there'd be grass so she could sit down in some comfort and watch the sky and allow the universe to put her mind back at ease, back to that peace she'd not experienced since a few months after Voldemort's fall. She rushed towards the clearing and sighed in relief when she felt the grass beneath her bare feet.

Hermione sat down and looked upward, letting her thoughts wander. Ron... It had been good while it'd lasted. But if she was honest with herself, she'd known from the start that it had never been meant to be permanent. He was a people's boy, had always thrived on attention showered upon him by others, whereas she was perfectly content with just a close friend or two, and any social attention irritated rather than pleased her.

Viktor... She'd seen him as a saviour, a platonic friend, like Harry, only not the best friend of her soon-to-be ex-husband. He'd been very supportive when she and Ron had broken up a few weeks ago. When he'd tried to become more intimate, she'd been frightened. Now she was glad, relieved, that he'd left so fast. A heavy sigh escaped her.

Snape's hair on his skin stood erect when he heard a positively female sigh not even five yards away.

"Who is there?" he asked sharply.

"Good heavens, sir, you're in Bulgaria and expect a reply in English?" a female voice asked, sounding almost amused.

He recognised that voice. Somewhat deeper now than her younger self, but nevertheless, Gryffindor's poster child during the Dark Lord's rise and fall and beyond. He intensely remembered the jealousy he'd felt towards Minerva for being able to wax lyrical about the girl's brain, her abilities, her support of Potter and anything that stood for the light, her research into the likelihood of the megalomaniac's fall that outshone even Vector's own Arithmantic calculations. All while he'd been forced to favour the idiots of his own House. "Miss Granger. Beg your pardon. Mrs Weasley. What a pleasure," he drawled.

She huffed. "Granger will do just fine, thank you, Professor!" she said, her speech ending in another sigh, though not quite as heavy as the one that had drawn his attention. "What brings you here?"

He considered momentarily treating her like a student, then thought better of it. If the *Daily Prophet* was right, she'd reached the end of her marriage to the youngest Weasley boy and was probably rather maudlin. "A need for quiet, for peace, Miss Granger, is what brings me here."

She sighed yet again, but this time it sounded almost content... nearly attractive. "It's a great place for peace, isn't it?"

"I'm sure it is if one is not stalked by some idiot of the local male species."

She chuckled. "Too right. Thankfully, said local is gone now."

The silence that followed was comfortable. The sky provided sufficient entertainment until the temperature dropped and he felt her shiver. "Go home, Miss Granger. It's getting cold."

She stood up slowly. "Good night, Professor." Then, she was gone.

He scrunched his face. "I didn't mean it, Granger..."

His words were met with complete silence. Even the birds had stopped chirping.

She was there, sitting at *his* table when he entered the café, furiously writing away on some parchment. "How on earth did you find this place?" he asked.

She met his eyes. "It's the only one where I find coffee without pounds of sugar added."

He nodded. *Go figure. She is the daughter of two dentists after all.* "Mind if I sit down?" He suddenly felt intimidated by her presence.

She smiled at him and waved her arms in an inviting gesture. "Be my guest."

The hours of silence were occasionally interrupted by the owner delivering fresh coffee without sugar, some Mediterranean snacks, her sighs, and his sighs. When twilight descended, she looked up. "Doesn't it look beautiful, the sun reflecting in the muddy water?"

He nodded. And swallowed. Narcissa, too, had always found beauty in any situation.

"Care to walk along the river?"

Her eyes met his. "I'd love to."

They walked, at first with shoes, but eventually she stopped to take off hers, and he followed.

He realised, rather suddenly, how much lighter he felt in her presence. There was something about a witch walking barefoot. Especially one with pretty feet.

Seven days later, she wasn't there, at his table at the café. They'd not talked all that much, but her simple presence and occasional comments, which might or might not lead to an entire conversation, had left him comfortable.

He sat down, accepted the unsweetened Turkish coffee brought by the owner himself, and waited.

By lunchtime he'd given up hope that she'd come by and tried to concentrate on writing up an article of his latest research into the cure of the after-effects of the Cruciatus curse. The *byurek* and flat bread the owner had placed on his table remained untouched, but he was unable to resist the rich aroma of the salad, a combination of greens, tomatoes, cucumber, and *sirene* cheese, covered generously with a fragrant yogurt dressing heavy with herbs.

He almost growled when the bell within the church tower rang two. It had to wake up the entire village. The locals loved their siesta as much as anyone in hot summers, and he was unable to fathom how they'd put up with the noise every single hour. It was worse than the damn dog's bark at every passer-by.

He realised, with a bitter taste in his throat, that the bell had never bothered him. Nor had the dog's barking tirades. When she'd been there. He remembered his first few days at the café when every sound had irritated him. Not so with Granger sitting at the table. He'd never paid attention to either bell or dog.

When the sun prepared to set, he stood, ready to leave. He wasn't quite ready to go on a solitary walk. *What the hell is wrong with me?* he thought...but the hike along the river might take his mind off her.

Staring at the ground to avoid the sharpest pebbles, he did not notice the figure approaching from the other side. Only when he heard her voice did he look up.

"I'm sorry I disappeared just like that, Professor," she said, now standing in front of him. "Work owled me this morning." She sighed heavily, and he wondered why she'd been called away from her holiday. "A Muggle couple disowned their child when they learned their son is a wizard. My efforts to mediate failed completely, so I had to take the boy to Hogwarts. Thankfully, Minerva was there and agreed to keep him until school starts next week. She bullied me into taking him home for the Christmas holidays, though."

"Who on earth would disown their eleven-year-old child because of that?" Snape asked incredulously.

A small, sad smile played around her lips. "Brian Dursley, Professor. I've had a few cases where Muggle parents freaked when they found out, but I've never failed to calm them, which is why the department owled me, even though I'm on holiday."

Snape went wide-eyed; then he shook his head. "I take it Petunia is the grandmother? She was jealous of Lily's abilities the moment she found out and turned it into hatred..."

Hermione sighed. "Yes, she's the grandmother. And from what I heard from Harry, Dudley's wife is worse than Petunia and her husband combined. Poor child..."

"Don't you find it ironic that a Dursley of all people produces a wizard?" Snape asked, his lip curling upward.

She nodded, her expression wistful. "Karma is a bitch, isn't it...?" She took a deep breath. "Anyway. I was hoping I'd catch you for the nightly walk. I've been enjoying these past few days tremendously."

Now he smiled. "As have I. If we hurry, we'll be able to get to the woods before the sun disappears completely."

She matched his increased pace, and when they reached the clearing, he noticed that she wasn't even out of breath.

They sat down and gazed at the stars, each seemingly lost in their own thoughts.

"I'm going to miss this," he said slowly.

"We have another week."

"Yes, and then I'll miss it."

"I will, too," she said softly. "On the other hand, we could agree to meet again and find a clearing in some forest in Britain to gaze at the stars..."

He felt more than saw her head turn towards him. "We could," he agreed. "There are coffee places all over the place nowadays, too."

He felt her smile. "Not Turkish coffee probably, but at least we won't have to hunt for unsweetened coffee."

"Probably not Turkish," she agreed. "But whatever coffee it is, as long as it's not laden with sugar..."

Silence rang through the air. The stars above shone brightly, and the moon showed all but a sliver with an almost-smile if one looked closely, as if in full approval of the scene down below.

"Hermione..."

"Severus..."

Somehow, the distance between them had disappeared since they'd sat down yards apart. He found himself right next to her.

"This is where you met?" Brian sounded disbelieving.

"Actually, we met in the clearing of the forest. We'll take you there in a bit. It's a lot more beautiful at night," Severus said. "But yes, we spent the first few days here, at this very table, with this kind of coffee. Mostly in silence."

Brian grinned. "Why am I not surprised." He cast mischievous glances between the two people he'd come to love over the last six years.

"So now you know our last secret and why you got to spend a couple of weeks with Harry and Ginny every summer," Hermione said.

"I never minded that, Hermione." Brian smiled. "Sometimes I think back to my early childhood, how I never fitted in, and then you came along, and my life all changed. I will never forget that. And I hope to spend many more holidays with you, and probably some with Harry and Ginny and James and Albus and Lily. But first..." he puffed his chest, "...I'm aiming to beat both your NEWT scores."

Hermione and Severus exchanged glances; then she said, "And we'll be proud of you, Brian!"

Severus chuckled. "You know, son, what really convinced me Hermione was the right woman for me was her account of rescuing you. She knew about your father's parents; her best friend, Potter..." he didn't forget the customary sneer at the mention of the name, "...grew up with them after all." He smiled his typical smile that still was

closer to a smirk, but it was a happy one.

"Uh. Right." Brian fidgeted. "I'll look away then while you snog her."

A/N: Prompts from: kittylefish: *stargazing*, Lady_Dragonsinger: *song of the lark*, corianderpie: *rubies*,

rubble, ruse, rug burn

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