

As to a Portrait, Gently Drawn

by shefa

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Chapter 1 of 1

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He can't remember if the stones of the castle have always absorbed the light, sucking it beneath the pebbled surface like shards of debris thrown into deep water. All he knows is that each day as he prowls its halls, the meagre sunlight sinks into the age-worn stone and disappears...blindingly apt, he thinks, considering the proclivities of the castle's newest inhabitants.

It is a measure of his weariness that the scant moment he allows himself to lean into one of the niches that time has hollowed in one of the rough, grey walls feels practically luxurious.

The students, those who remain, are tucked away in their classrooms...safety a relative term in this climate. He patrols the halls nowadays during school hours more vigilantly than he ever had done during the long nights before the Dark Lord ascended. Such delineations don't matter anymore, he thinks. Not now, when even the light is hiding.

Albus...the bastard...always did advocate hiding in plain sight.

He is shaking his head at his own irreverence when he rounds a corner and finds her precisely where she is not meant to be.

~~*~~

She is perched on a stone bench, legs folded, drawing tablet on her lap. Until this moment, the ubiquitous presence of chalk and paper in her hand had slipped past him, immaterial. But her father's choices make her anything but inconsequential now, instead hurtling her to the top of the list of students that the Carrows...

He swallows thickly as bile rises to choke him, and he shakes his head as if it were possible to banish the unwelcome image with a gesture as crisp as ~~a~~*Evanesco*.

It's only the heightened risk to her that draws his notice today, he thinks. She is Flitwick's responsibility, though the Charms master is more likely to focus his own inept efforts protecting her from *him* rather than from actual danger.

They will hurt her if they can.

He'll be *damned* if it happens on his watch.

~~*~~

"Miss Lovegood." He speaks in little more than a whisper, but when she looks up from her work, she is more curious than startled.

"Oh, hello, Headmaster." She greets him like a pleasant surprise.

"Fifty points from Ravenclaw for blatantly skiving off lessons," he hisses.

She regards him solemnly for a moment before responding. "You don't need to worry, Headmaster," she says. "Professor Flitwick let me go early from Charms as I've already mastered conjuring spells. And the Carrows are busy devising detentions with Filch...they're probably going on about thumbscrews and all sorts of devices that pinch or pull." She pauses to frown, puzzled that this could hold anyone's attention for long. "I expect they'll be occupied for ages, what with all the different chains and things Filch has in his rooms. So you see, I'm safe here." Her gaze is steady and he hates that she isn't afraid.

"Students are not permitted in the corridors while class is in session. You are *blatantly* breaking the rules, Miss Lovegood." He presses on as if she has not just treated him like an ally. An *ally*, Merlin help them both, in this treacherous game. He feels the rant bubbling to the surface when the edge of her drawing catches his eye and sucks the breath from his body.

The walls and turrets of Hogwarts all but rise from the page. Not the Hogwarts of today, shrouded as if ready for burial, but as it was once, not so terribly long ago...a burning reminder of what he'd already nearly forgotten.

Solid and certain in its purpose, impenetrable, and welcoming.

Sure.

Safe.

The light that has disappeared from the air of the castle has found its home in the lines of chalk, and he can scarcely make himself turn away.

"Put away your infernal drawing, Miss Lovegood, and go directly to your dormitory."

He knows that she hears the roughness in his voice because she tilts her head in that inquisitive way that drove him mad when he taught her. Her soft words to him...for him...flow like a whispered wish, a feather on a current of air, even as she turns to walk away.

"Stay safe, Professor."

His hope, unvoiced, floods him.

And you, Miss Lovegood. And you.

~~*~~

He notices her everywhere now.

In the shadowed corridors where she still sometimes skips on her way to class or in the Great Hall where Ravenclaw table is filled with students keeping their heads determinedly *down*. Hers never stays down for long, he knows. It pops up...curious eyes scanning for something only she seeks.

At every meal she looks for him...looks *at* him. While the others pointedly avoid his eyes, she invariably catches them with what even the most vigilant observer would think the flightiest of glances. She lets her gaze rest on him for only an instant and then nods once as if satisfied, possibly the only human being in the castle, or...if he's honest, anywhere, who might judge him adequate.

It is an unexpected comfort to realise that she is checking on him and that in doing so, allows him to check on her.

He finds her most often in the alcove where he came upon her that first day, swimming in light, chalk in hand.

He thinks of her that way now. Light seeks her out, pooling around her as she bows her head in concentration. Flitwick has given her leave to claim this corner of the castle, and Severus resents him for using this fey girl as proxy for his defiance.

He won't admit...not even to himself...the relief he feels each time he turns the sharp corner into the niche she favours for her sketching. Each and every time, he represses the image of her bench in his mind's eye, empty, squashes the lurching feeling that comes when he imagines what it would take to keep her from this spot when the light flowing through the window is best for drawing.

Each day, he watches her, lingering in shadow before stepping forward to chide her for her solitary pursuit, chivvying her out and back to the groups of other students where he likes to believe she will be safe.

But day by day, gossamer words fall from him. He watches them float through the space *between* like the snowflakes that the wind tumbles about just outside the window. The words they share don't matter, only that they are true...unsullied by lies and games, just like the snow outside before it's been trampled by unthinking feet.

Their exchanges are always brief; there are unfriendly ears everywhere and his game is high-stakes. None of it keeps him from seeking her out, no matter the promises he makes to keep his distance. He hates that he cannot stop himself and would prefer not to consider how he's come to depend on glances and words shared with a girl he would have dismissed as a child scant months before.

It is propinquity, he thinks. And the irresistible lure of a soul whose own magic is its unerring vision for truth...even *his* truth. He doesn't question how she knows; he just accepts the gift of these moments where he is, for once, no longer so terribly alone.

Only later, alone at night, deepening dread winds itself around his chest, crushing fear of the cost he...they...*she*, will inevitably be asked to pay.

There is no comfort that comes for free.

~~*~~

She uses words sparingly, he notices, and...delivery notwithstanding...with crystal-clear intent. Her awareness and obfuscated directness is a blessing and a curse, both. As the ease between them crystallises, he shakes sometimes from what she conveys in the space of a moment. Words unsaid grow more powerful still, and he retreats back into the numbing familiarity of looming and menacing.

She just raises her eyebrows and waits for it to pass.

This time, as he looms over her, he tries again. But she just dons a rueful smile as he sneers at the drawings he's so obviously hungering to see, even while taunting their luminescence.

"People let themselves get distracted by such silly things," she tells him today. "As if the shadow falling on an object changes its *actual* colour." She sighs, tired, as if the weight of explaining such ludicrousness falls solely on her shoulders.

But it's when she meets his eyes squarely...for the first time, he realises...that he feels his body tense...blood rushing to all sorts of places it is most certainly *not* needed...and he puts the edge back into his voice. Relief floods him at her imperviousness to attempts to make her bleed.

Besides, the application of *this* blade is meant to be self-inflicted.

No matter how fractious he becomes, she just looks at him with that expectant expression...the one that makes his insides squirm...and tells him to stay safe as she does every time they part. As she tucks her drawings back inside the magical pouch designed for them, he watches, transfixed, as her renderings of light and life disappear into its depths, and he wants nothing more in that moment than to pull them from her hands.

The weeks have borne image after image like these, drawings that sing to him with their truth.

By the time he notices what it does to him that she reveals her heart and her soul in the lines of chalk on fibre, it is long past too late.

~~*~~

The first time he sees the fanciful figure fly across her page, he barely suppresses the urge to laugh.

"What on earth is *that*, Miss Lovegood?" he taunts. "It looks rather like a Pygmy Puff crossed with..." He squints at the page. "Is that a salamander tail?" She raises her eyebrows and continues to sketch.

"You've never seen one, then," she says as if she knows this for a fact.

"Seen what, Miss Lovegood?"

She smiles as she puts the finishing touches on what might be a small wing, or possibly, wildly out-of-control hair. "Tikvas. They're terribly shy, you know," she says. "They're quite accustomed to being alone... left all by themselves in Pandora's box for so long like that, you know. Father says that there are some living in the Forbidden Forest, though nobody's seen any in centuries." Her brow knits as if she might solve the problem of the missing creatures this afternoon. "Still, you have to *call* for them, and even when you do, they'll come only if they're needed."

He feels an odd tangle of affection and exasperation that she persists believing in imaginary creatures and in the scarce handful of mythological tales that have no corroborating wizarding evidence.

"How might one of those," he waves his hand at the page, "fluff balls know that it *was* needed? And for what manner of task?" He crosses his arms even as he leans over to drink in the details of the drawing. Imaginary or not, it looks ready to leap from the page, and he fights the inexplicable urge to reach out and stroke the tufts of hair that burst from it.

At the very least it might distract him from his growing...his *unforgivable*...desire to touch *her*.

There are many lines that Snape has crossed in his long career as a spy. Laying his hand on a student who he has pledged his lifeblood to protect will never be one of them.

It's been years since he tried to control the treacherous dealings of his heart. He tells himself that it's a good thing he's learned to ignore its cries.

~~*~~

When he catches her, along with Weasley and Longbottom, in his office attempting to steal the Sword of Gryffindor, he thinks that he might actually burst a blood vessel, he's so angry.

Stupid, stupid, stupid girl. He can barely see and may have forgotten how to breathe when he hears her soft voice cut through the fog.

"I tried to tell them it was safe with you, Headmaster." He looks up to see her; she's moved closer to him while the other two sit with their defiant expressions and their eyes turned away.

He cannot speak, but her words give him a pocket of air and he breathes again.

His gift to her...the only offering he can allow...is detention with Hagrid: proximity to the Forbidden Forest and, with it, the chance to hunt for Tikvas.

The other two glare at him, but her soft smile eases his heart.

Someone should try to find some hope; it might as well be her.

~~*~~

The next time he sees her alone is the afternoon before the Hogwarts Express leaves to take the students home for the holidays. He has given in to thinking about her today, and despite himself, feels a bittersweet mixture of relief and emptiness at the knowledge that she will soon be far from here...from him...*safesafesafe*, too far away... but just... safe. *Will she be safe?*

He hates that it seems to him as if the only moments he breathes are when he sees her... and yet, with her far away from here...where danger doesn't even bother skulking as it glides through the corridors...he might breathe easily for a few weeks. Breathe easy for her, home with her father... where she should be. *But will she stay safe?*

Her hand is still flying over the page and a wisp of blonde hair obscures her expression as she puts the finishing touches on the drawing that she has curled herself around as if to protect it from outside eyes. He feels an unaccustomed pang at the thought that someone other than he might see her like this, here, concentration fierce, truth rising from the swirl of pigment on parchment.

But when her body shifts from its protective embrace, he sees his own face rising from the page and stifles a sharp intake of breath. She has rendered him there, all sharp lines and angles...but more. Sallow skin of chalk is warmer in the afternoon light, and she has ignored the lankness of his hair in favour of piercing features and *expression* that makes him flush with discomfort.

In her hand, his eyes burn beneath lashes that he'd forgotten were long enough to make Lily sigh in the fading light of summer afternoons so long ago. The hurt in his eyes sears his soul nearly as much as the softness she captures in the curve of his mouth.

She is not supposed to know, not meant to see what he can barely stand to name. His stomach knots with fear that she is not alone in *seeing*.

He is more relieved than sad that the Express leaves in the morning.

Long moments, he watches as his image comes to life, and woven into the space behind him, the swirling fluff balls whose surely imaginary purpose in life she never did tell him. Fluff or not, she attends to every tuft as if it is the critical factor determining the portrait's wholeness.

Finally, she lifts her head to meet his eyes as if she's known he'd been standing there all along.

"Do you like it?" she asks.

He can only nod, his voice having gone the way of the Crumple-Horned Snorckack.

"I thought I'd keep it with me while I'm away, but then I realised that it wouldn't be wise to have such a thing in my bags if Snatchers should find me." She talks about the possibility of being snatched as if it would be a mild inconvenience and the danger solely his own. His stomach roils at the knowledge that the last thing Snatchers would care about is a portrait of the Headmaster in her trunk.

While he's been lost in midday nightmares, she's continued to talk.

"They do seem to belong here, don't you think?"

He could pretend to know what she's talking about, but for once, he comes clean.

"What seems to belong here, Miss Lovegood?"

She smiles indulgently. "The Tikvas. In your portrait." It's as if she trusts him to know what they are and why in the name of all that's magical they should be swirling around his image.

"If you would cease to speak in riddles..." he sneers, even as he edges closer. The movement of the magical animals calls to him, though he refuses to give her the satisfaction of seeing that the imaginary creatures evoke any feeling in him at all.

"They *want* to be near you when you need them," she explains, patient like the teacher he's never been. "And I do believe you need them more than just about anybody I know." She looks at him with eyes sharper and more brilliantly silver-blue than the Hogwarts sky used to be in the days before it fell. "I'm glad you called for them, Headmaster."

He's caught in her eyes and cannot look away. There is no breath anywhere in his body, and he knows he must get away from her now. Before he can move, she rises, colt-like and slightly awkward in every way but in how she looks at him.

He's trying to catch his breath when she presses the portrait into hands that have risen...*to embrace her; to push her away; to clutch her image of him to his heart.*and says the words that he starves for, no matter she's repeated them a hundred times.

"Stay safe, Headmaster. Please."

And you, Miss Lovegood. And you.

~~*~~

The months after she is taken pass in a blur of rage and pain. After all the losses he's borne, he rails against himself for caring about the absence of one young woman whose voice and unwavering gaze should never have anchored him to begin with.

He is torn by the loss of each of them. Each student who has fled, each witch or wizard whose capture he learns about in harsh whispers overheard in the staffroom and in triumph on the tongues of the vilest creatures he's had the displeasure to know.

None of whom...none...does he have the slightest chance to save.

He feels unmoored, a scrap of paper blown about in the gusts of wind that come from nowhere and everywhere. Only the page he grasps in the privacy of his rooms anchors him; the coloured lines and whirls of pigment make him feel alive and *connected* in a way nothing else can. When he touches the page, he feels...just for a moment...infused with light.

Deep in the darkness, night after night, the edges of the drawing she left in his frozen grasp grow ragged from his caress.

~~*~~

Decades of listening at keyholes makes unearthing her location a simple matter of skulking around conversations, especially, it turns out, at Malfoy Manor. Simultaneously relieved and enraged, Severus skirts around the perimeter of discussions that would, he hopes, tell him of the Dark Lord's plans for the inhabitants of the Manor's cellar.

He dares not think what he would do should he see her slight form suspended over a tabletop. Spinning.

Never has he wished more for Potter to be reckless, to be brave and bold as when he hears tell that Snatchers have taken him and his friends to the Malfoy's estate. He never did have the chance to test his Occlumency against his relief at the escape of one who held his heart. He's not sure whom to thank that he can do so now.

So he sends his thanks into the ether and hopes it counts for something.

~~*~~

Time accelerates suddenly after dragging for months.

He is weary.

He is waiting for Potter or the Dark Lord...for *someone* to make a definitive move.

He is hoping for an end...finally...to this horror.

At least he knows that she is safe now, or at the very least, gone from the prison that used to be the Malfoy estate. All he cares about is that she is far from the clutches of the Dark Lord.

When time speeds up again and he flies from the castle window to the heart of the Forbidden Forest, he is seized with the desire to hunt for Tikvas. *They come when you call*, she'd said.

He wonders if he were to call for her, if she would hear. If she would come.

Hours, *minutes... a lifetime* later, lying bleeding on a dirty floor, silver memory and scarlet blood spilling from him in the shadowed room, he has the vague thought that he'd not have predicted fireworks displays and the spin of fluffy whirligigs upon dying, but he'll take them over what he'd feared he might rise before his eyes in his last moments.

He wishes he had left something tangible...a memory, a word...for her.

And then one of the whirligigs grows arms that wrap around him, and he feels corn silk and wetness against his cheek. Arms squeeze with the tight sensation of Apparition, and the world compresses until he can barely draw breath. But by then, he's lost hold of the last, tenuous thread of consciousness, and is gone.

~~*~~

In the darkened alcove of the Headmaster's quarters, a large sheet of drawing paper sits nestled between layers of soft bedding. The edges have been worn ragged and rubbed to a soft sheen by the caress of a loving hand. As the castle trembles, the lines of chalk within the page glow bright and the figure within wakes.

His eyes are bright under long lashes as he looks around him...whirligigs spinning with their brilliant colours, his face lit...at last...with a smile.

~fin

Beta thanks to Annie Talbot and Ariadne, and to Tales of Snape for the magnificent banner.

Not mine, just playing.