

of my best men losing his touch, now, can I?" Voldemort drawled, to chuckles from the crowd.

"Next time I will do better, My Lord," Severus rasped, keeping his gaze on the floor. Waiting for another curse. Knowing it was coming didn't make it any easier to bear.

"The school has made you soft," his master told him. "But no matter. Before long we will have the school much as we have the Ministry, and you will be free to truly *indulge* yourself."

Severus had not yet heard anything about a plan to take Hogwarts, and terror shot through his trembling form — was there a plan going on that he didn't know about, or was the Dark Lord just pontificating about his vague and glorious plan for the future?

He hoped it was the latter. He didn't want to dwell on the implications of the former.

Painfully, carefully, he dragged himself to his feet, trying not to stagger too obviously as they were all dismissed. He couldn't show weakness here, not if he wanted to survive. Putting all his remaining strength into his thoughts of *home*, he apparated away, falling to his knees over the ward boundary of Seren Du.

"Oh, Master Severus!" Ceri gasped, and his vision was a blur as a small hand gripped him by the arm, the strange feeling of elf transportation overtaking him, sending another wave of aftershocks through his body.

"Fuck! Severus." That was Remus, and Severus recoiled from the familiar touch — he couldn't, he was filthy, he was a *murderer*, Remus shouldn't touch him. "Ceri, get the Nerve Tonic, highest strength." A moment, and then a vial was pressed against his lips. Severus swallowed clumsily, the potion instantly burning the pain and the trembling from his limbs. His heart rate began to return to normal. His fogged vision cleared. Remus' handsome face came into focus barely a foot away from him, those amber eyes full of worry and love so plainly it made Severus ache. "What happened?"

"Muggle hunting," Severus croaked out, keeping the contents of his stomach within him only through sheer force of will. "He thought I needed a *reward* for having to put up with the students and Dumbledore. He was not pleased with my performance — apparently I have *lost my touch*."

Remus' face twisted in fury, and for a moment Severus' heart stopped as he thought it might be directed at him. Then those features softened — not pity, never pity, but something close enough to make Severus' heart clench. "Come on, love. Let's get you out of those robes, into a nice hot bath. Can you stand? Can— can I help you up?"

Severus flinched. "I have killed four muggles tonight," he said flatly. "Two of them children."

Remus flinched too, a small movement he couldn't hide from Severus' keen eyes. "I'm sure you gave them a cleaner death than anyone else would have allowed them," he replied all the same, not a trace of doubt in him.