

The Dark Lord didn't often send Severus on raids such as this; his position at the school, his ability as a Potions Master, it all made him far too valuable to risk just on a bit of muggle slaughter. Clearly he thought Severus deserved a *reward*.

That, or he was so confident in his hold over the Ministry that he thought it wouldn't matter even if Severus did get caught.

Severus braced himself for another round, mind working frantically to think of how he could make this one look more torturous — then a shout of alarm went up that wasn't from the muggles.

"Order's coming!" someone warned, their voice magically amplified. "Scatter!"

His knees almost buckled with relief, but he didn't have time to be thankful. The Death Eaters around him began to apparate away, many of them throwing one last lethal curse at the group of muggles before they vanished. Severus turned on the spot, envisioning Voldemort's manor, and with a squeezing sensation he was gone.

Privately, he hoped Bellatrix stayed long enough to get caught. Long enough for one of the Order to kill her. But he doubted it — she was too clever for that, even in her insanity.

Sure enough, she returned only a few beats after him, holding something that dripped blood on the floor. It took Severus a few moments to realise it was the decapitated head of the blond muggle boy he'd killed. "Picked out an early Christmas present for myself," she declared proudly, holding it up. "Do you like it?"

"...Charming."

She giggled, then straightened up as the Dark Lord strode out in front of the gathered crowd. Severus hadn't counted, but it seemed like there were fewer of them than they'd started with.

Good.

"One day, we shall show Dumbledore's precious *Order* exactly how little they can do to stop our glorious future," Voldemort remarked in his chilling, sibilant voice. "For now, we will let them clean up our messes and think they are *succeeding*." A few cheers burst out, but were quickly silenced by a red-eyed glare. "Severus," the monster called, and Severus walked forward obediently, trying to stop his heart from hammering. "You seemed... unenthusiastic. Did you not like your reward?"

"I enjoyed it deeply, My Lord," he replied, bowing his head. "I am very grateful for the opportunity. It has been so long... I wanted to take in the atmosphere, before I dirtied my hands."

The Dark Lord smirked, and Severus knew that would not be enough. "*Crucio*." He was on his knees, screaming, his nerves turning into a hundred thousand acid-coated knives. The pain lasted so long he thought he might die from it. When it finally ended, he gasped for breath, muscles shuddering with aftershocks. "You disappoint me, Severus. I cannot have one