

Voldemort's thin lips twisted in a dangerous smile. "They keep you so busy at that castle. I'm sure you have plenty of frustrations at those brats — at the Potter boy, so close and yet you cannot harm him. At the Malfoy boy... you must be so disappointed in his... *choices*."

Severus expertly pushed back all his pride and love for Draco behind his Occlumency walls, letting himself scowl. "You have heard of his romance with Potter, then, My Lord?" he replied, trying to sound utterly disgusted. Red eyes burned.

"They will both be destroyed, in due time," the Dark Lord promised him. "For now, however, I offer you another outlet for those frustrations."

Severus' heart sank even further as several Death Eaters whooped eagerly behind him, Bellatrix Lestrange the loudest among them. "You honour me, My Lord."

That hideous face grew even more so with the grotesque expression of glee, and when the Dark Lord offered his arm, Severus had no choice but to take it.

They reappeared in what seemed to be a perfectly ordinary muggle residential area. Fairly affluent, by the looks of it; middle-class, nothing enormously fancy, but certainly far nicer than where he'd grown up. Several houses had lights on, the families curled up watching TV in the winter evening. Many of the houses had coloured lights strung up outside — it was a cheerful scene. Peaceful.

It would not remain so for long.

A series of cracks heralded the arrival of the rest of the Death Eaters. There had to be at least twenty of them; Voldemort had started bringing larger groups on these things in the last few months, since the Order had started thwarting them so soundly.

If only there were a way for Severus to alert them now, without blowing his cover.

"Enjoy yourselves, my loyal subjects," Voldemort instructed, raising his wand. "You have earned it."

And then the chaos began.

Immediately, one of the houses burst into flames. The Death Eaters around him started to fan out, shouting and cackling as they blew up cars and destroyed gardens. A few curious — or stupid — muggles stepped out of their homes, some holding knives or cricket bats or even, in one case, an umbrella. All of them stopped in their doorways, staring agog at the terrifying physical impossibilities happening before them, then screaming as their torture began.

Severus could not allow himself to think. He had a cover to maintain; he had his own life to protect.

He made a beeline for a house that had not yet been claimed by his *fellows*, blasting the door open with an unnecessarily showy flourish.

Maybe if he was loud enough, the muggles inside might run before he reached them.