

But that was not the case. He found three of them, huddled upstairs in the smallest bedroom — a man, a woman, and a young child. Bile rose in Severus' throat, but he pushed it away. They would not survive the night, no matter what he did. Had he been younger, more foolish, he might have tried some elaborate ruse for them to feign death until the danger had passed. But he knew better now.

The best he could offer them was a quick, painless death.

Three flashes of green light, and the room was hauntingly silent. Severus grit his teeth, and got to work, his magic cutting into their skin and tugging at their clothes, twisting the child's neck at an unnatural angle.

If he worked well enough, none of those with him would realise all the damage had been done post-mortem.

Just in case, he set fire to the child's bed, letting the flames leap from one polyester stuffed toy to the next, catching the corner of the curtains and melting the brightly coloured plastic play contraption beneath.

He turned away, confident the whole room would be ashes before anyone could stop it.

If only his night could end there.

Stepping back out into the cold street, he saw the other Death Eaters had rounded up a whole cluster of muggles, jeering at them as they huddled together and cried. Many of them were dead on the outskirts of the group — those who had tried to fight back, perhaps.

"Come, Severus!" Bellatrix cackled, her mask abandoned and her features rapturous as she held a muggle under a Cruciatus curse. "Pick one, pretend it's that foul brat of Cissa's! Look, there's a blond one for you!" She jerked her wand, and a teenage boy was separated from the rest — he looked a little younger than Draco, his hair a little darker, but the similarities were enough to almost break Severus' composure. He grit his teeth, raised his wand, tried not to look the boy in the eye.

"Sectumsempra!" he called curtly — no one would begrudge him using his signature spell, the creation he had been so *proud* of as a teen.

Huge gashes appeared across the boy's chest. Severus made sure the magic cut deep enough — the boy was dead in less than a second. Someone in the crowd wailed; a mother, perhaps. Beside him, Bellatrix pouted exaggeratedly.

"That's no fun!" she cried, like a child denied their toys. "You're supposed to make it *last*!"

"Forgive me," Severus drawled, as cool and unruffled on the outside as always. "My temper seems to have... overtaken me. As you suggested, I was imagining the Malfoy boy."

Bellatrix cackled again, grinning a bloodthirsty grin. "It's so easy to slip, isn't it? They're so *weak*." She shot off a Cutting curse into the huddle, and a scream answered. "You'll have to do better with the next one, Sevvie — you've been out of the game for far too long!"