

Viridis

by h_vic

Many difficult things have been asked of Severus Snape over the years, and perhaps this latest one ought not to have been the hardest. But yet, he knew that, just beyond the gargoyle, he would be forced to confront the most difficult test he'd ever known: facing the man he killed.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Severus Snape hesitated, facing the gargoyle outside the Headmaster's office, wondering whether or not he required a password. He somehow doubted that Minerva would be willing to tell him the one that she had set before the summer had begun. Experimentally, he tapped the gargoyle with his wand, and the door sprang open. It seemed the office had at least recognised him as the true headmaster, even if he himself could not.

"*Viridis*," he hissed, assuming that he should establish the new password. Let others believe it to be for Slytherin green; he alone would know its true meaning. It seemed appropriate. After all, he had done it all for Lily.

As he stepped onto the slowly revolving staircase, a small part of him almost expected it to reject him, turning into a steep slope and expelling him unceremoniously into the corridor, as the Slytherin girls' dormitory had once done to him in his youth. He was sure that would please his colleagues immeasurably.

He was used to being disliked or even hated, but the looks on their faces had been more difficult to bear than he had anticipated reproach from Poppy, contempt from Filius, and even disgust from Horace. From Minerva had come a barely veiled fury that seemed to simmer deeply. He did not know what he had expected; perhaps, before now he had been deliberately avoiding lingering on their reactions, inevitable as they had been. He had walked his dark path for so long that he had tried to fool himself into believing that others' opinions of him no longer mattered, but perhaps that was not as true as he liked to believe. These were people with whom he had worked and whose respect he had once held, even if he had never had their friendship, and to lose that respect was just another unpleasant effect of the road he had been forced to take.

He was thankful for small mercies, though. As the staircase carried him upwards to the place he dreaded, Severus was glad of Hagrid's absence, as he was fairly sure the groundsman would attempt to tear him limb-from-limb at the mere sight of Severus. He would, he knew though, have to face the man once term started. Still, he would cross that bridge when he came to it. He had more pressing concerns right now, such as how he was expected to hold a civilised conversation with the portrait of the man he had been forced to kill!

Having reached the top of the stairs, Severus hesitated outside the office door *his* office door, he realised with a grimace. He took a deep breath, pulled himself up to his full height, set his face into an inscrutable mask, and pushed open the door.

Flat, painted, but still sparkling, blue eyes met his, and a familiar voice welcomed him, as it had many times before, whilst the other portraits met his entry with stony silence or empty frames. Those other occupants of the office may have understood why he had done what he had, but that did not mean that they had to like it.

"Ah, Severus, it is you then, and not Minerva?" Dumbledore's portrait asked him in a casual tone that Severus knew from experience was anything but nonchalant. It was Dumbledore at his most perceptive. Severus reflexively locked down his thoughts before realising the futility of the action when he was facing a portrait—a mere echo of the man could not perform Legilimency.

"I take it this means the Ministry has fallen?" asked Dumbledore. Severus nodded curtly, still standing awkwardly in the doorway.

"Do come in properly," Dumbledore prompted him. "This is *your* office now, after all."

Severus scowled at the painting. Trust Dumbledore to remind him so obliquely of why he was there. Dumbledore was obviously seeking to prompt him into initiating that particular conversation, but Severus had no intention of complying.

"The Dark Lord holds the Ministry, but not Potter, and he wishes me to run the school in the manner he deems appropriate. We will have two Death Eaters now on the staff besides myself of course," Severus said, refusing to play a dead man's games and turning straight to the important matters, which had to be considered.

"You are not a Death Eater, Severus," Dumbledore contradicted him gently, but Severus would not be drawn into that particular mess of semantics, and he pressed on.

"The Dark Lord was most insistent, and it did not seem wise to refuse to accept his wishes for the Carrows to be appointed."

"The Carrows?" Dumbledore's eyes narrowed, and Severus knew Dumbledore was weighing the dangers of their presence against those of their absence. "No, I'm quite sure it would not have been wise to refuse. But two?"

"Defence Against the Dark Arts, or the Dark Arts themselves as I'm sure it will now become," Severus said, his lips curling into a bitter smile. He knew most would believe that he would wish it to be that way, and for the second time that day he realised that perhaps it mattered. Dumbledore nodded a curt understanding.

"And Muggle Studies," Severus added in a tone carefully devoid of all emotion.

The sparkling, blue light in the portrait's eyes seemed to dim a little. "Then...?"

"Charity Burbage is dead, yes." Severus found himself unable to meet Dumbledore's piercing eyes any longer, and he moved to retrieve the Pensieve from the cupboard for something to occupy himself with. He noticed as he did so that many more of the portraits were now occupied than had been when he had entered, all listening in horrified silence.

"And you were there," Severus heard Dumbledore state slowly. It was not a question.

His back to the portrait, Severus nodded sharply and sought to remove the resurrected horror of reliving that moment by transferring his memories to the Pensieve. But the memory was not quiescent, and as he withdrew his wand from the surface, it brought with it the shimmering form of Charity, spinning once again in the air.

"Please... Severus..."

Severus whirled angrily back to face the portrait as the image faded. "How many more?" he demanded, disgusted at the harsh note of desperation he could not suppress. "How many more voices must I hear echo those same words?"

"I'm sorry, Severus. I truly am. It has always been a difficult path you tread."

"But my soul's expendable?" Severus demanded again, bitterness welling up within him as his voice dropped to a cold whisper.

Dumbledore met his accusatory gaze with level sincerity. "Not expendable, no, but perhaps already damaged and a little more... appropriate." Dumbledore had paused, as if choosing the final word with great care. "Would you rather I had encouraged Draco to kill me?"

Severus closed his eyes briefly, raising a hand to push lank hair away from his face. "Draco was there too," he said slowly, the words drawn painfully from deep inside him.

When he opened his eyes again, it was to see tears sparkling in Dumbledore's. "I see," the portrait said quietly. "He has now witnessed two murders then? But he has performed none?"

Severus nodded. "Much like Potter," he added harshly, aware, as sharply as Dumbledore, that both boys had watched him commit such an act.

"Yes, much like Harry," Dumbledore echoed with no hint that he acknowledged the turmoil this turn in the conversation provoked in Severus. "But both their souls still remain pure. Something which can be said of neither you nor I."

"Stains on your conscience, Albus?" asked Severus with a darkly ironic laugh, a harsh sound a long way from true joy, but then it had been so long since he had genuinely laughed that Severus was not even sure he would know how. "The taint of those who have suffered for your plans? Those sacrificed to the greater good, perhaps? Those like me and Lily's boy?"

"You are perhaps a little closer to the truth than you could realise," admitted Dumbledore, and the painted man seemed to shrink a little before Severus' eyes. His sparkle faded. "But," he added with a shake of the head as if pushing away darker thoughts, "now is not the time for that."

"The line you walk this year must be narrower than ever before," said Dumbledore with a disconcertingly abrupt shift in conversation—a tactic to which Severus had long been accustomed. "You must appear to allow the Carrows free rein and faithfully follow Voldemort's orders, but yet the students must be protected."

"Fear of a name, Severus" Dumbledore had begun to add in response to Severus' flinching at the Dark Lord's name, but Severus cut him off.

"If now is not the time for the stains on your conscience, then neither is it the time for my limitations," Severus said in an abrupt tone, but he was long past caring whether he was thought rude, and Dumbledore accepted the rebuke with good grace.

"Another time then," Dumbledore said quietly, but it was not a conversation Severus had any intention of resurrecting, if he had any say in the matter. "You must find a way to curb the worst of the Carrows' cruelty," Dumbledore continued as if nothing more had been said in the interim. "You will, I am certain, be able to rely on the compassion of your colleagues to afford the students some measure of protection."

"Not to mention their contempt for me and their readiness to do anything which may undermine me," Severus said bitterly.

"Ah, yes, but we can use their antipathy to our advantage whilst maintaining the illusion of your loyalty to Voldemort."

"You're good at that, aren't you? Using people to the best advantage?" Severus spat back at the portrait. "That is, after all, what you have done with me, is it not? AND WITH LILY'S SON?" Severus had kept his voice icily calm until that point, but his composure broke with his final words.

"Don't let Lily's sacrifice be in vain, Severus," the portrait said.

"As if I ever would! That has been my goal for sixteen years. Why should I waver now? Or do you feel you are losing your grip on our *livebeing dead*?" Severus poured

all the bitterness he felt into those cruel words.

Dumbledore's portrait merely raised an eyebrow, and the repressive power of his silent disappointment and reproach bore down on Severus.

"The Muggle-born students will not be returning to Hogwarts," Severus said more calmly. He knew, if he were honest with himself, that the portrait was not truly the man. Dumbledore was gone, and arguing with this lingering remnant of Dumbledore's memory could achieve nothing.

"I expected as much."

"And the Dark Lord is now reluctant to spill magical blood, as far as that is possible. He views it as a waste. No student will die at Hogwarts! Not while I am Headmaster," Severus vowed.

"You've finally accepted it then?" asked Dumbledore, fixing Severus with a piercing stare.

"Accepted what?"

"That you *are* Headmaster."

Severus nodded curtly, afraid to trust himself to speak, and seated himself, for the first time, behind the large desk.

A/N: *Just in case anyone was wondering, 'viridis' means green in Latin.*