

The Dullest Smoke of Hell

by Scarlet Crystal

Harry Potter lies face down in the dirt, surrounded by a ring of Death Eaters in the Forbidden Forest. Narcissa Malfoy approaches, lowering hand to the boy's chest to see if he yet lives. Everyone knows what happens next: Narcissa announces Lord Voldemort's triumph as Harry plays dead. What if, in this crucial moment, Bellatrix did not trust her feckless sister? What if she strode past her celebratory comrades and knelt by the Dark Lord's fallen enemy, wishing to feel for herself the absence of the boy's heartbeat? This is the story of that tragic turn of events.

I.One.

Chapter 1 of 1

Harry Potter lies face down in the dirt, surrounded by a ring of Death Eaters in the Forbidden Forest. Narcissa Malfoy approaches, lowering hand to the boy's chest to see if he yet lives. Everyone knows what happens next: Narcissa announces Lord Voldemort's triumph as Harry plays dead. What if, in this crucial moment, Bellatrix did not trust her feckless sister? What if she strode past her celebratory comrades and knelt by the Dark Lord's fallen enemy, wishing to feel for herself the absence of the boy's heartbeat? This is the story of that tragic turn of events.

Bellatrix leaned across the table, hands gripping the dark cloth covering its surface. Lucius suppressed a heavy sigh; his dark-haired sister-in-law had always adored theatrics. He knew what came next, as well: she would rise slowly from her seat at the dinner table, inching her face towards whatever attentive prey...or, rather, terrified listener...at the age of four sat trembling across from her.

"But I did not believe my sister's affirmation," Bellatrix breathed. "No, Scorpius. I did not trust, not even in my traitorous family." She flicked her eyes pointedly at Lucius. "The Dark Lord did not think twice, but I... I knew that all could not be right. So I approached the crumpled, would-be corpse..."

Scorpius recoiled visibly as his great-aunt walked her fingers slowly towards him, her eyes following intently. He did not bother to keep his tremors in check. The fear had gripped the child as Lucius had known it would. Bellatrix was all too skilled at her craft.

"The cheering fell silent as I shoved my pathetic excuse of a sister aside and fell to my knees beside the limp form of Harry Potter," she whispered, withdrawing her hand ever so slightly.

Scorpius ceased all movement. His eyes grew wide, and a blazing, fiery beacon seemed to ignite behind them. Like every Death Eater child, he knew the historic twist of fate that came next in the story: the tides had turned, and instead of the ultimate failure, all had fallen into place. The ensuing moments underlined every ideal that Scorpius had learned from birth, and the discovery of Harry Potter's near escape was a monumental example for any child to remember ceaselessly "constant vigilance."

"I stretched out my hand and grasped his shirt," Bellatrix continued, eyes glazed over, as if it were not all an act to relive the events of six or so years past; her hand made a fist in the air above the elaborately carved Christmas goose. The glow of the candlelight danced in her eyes. Then... *smack!* She slammed her fist on the table in front of Scorpius, who yelped in terror and delight.

"Yes, my boy, I discovered his false play! I, and I alone, unveiled his attempt to pretend as my disloyal sister fell back in shock!" she said in a carrying voice. Others around the table paused in their meal to roll their eyes, cough nervously, or watch her impassioned monologue.

"Isn't that enough?" Lucius asked tiredly, unable to bear any more as Bellatrix took a deep breath to continue. "We've all heard it in full many times over, even young Scorpius here."

Bellatrix appeared highly affronted at the interruption, but she relaxed back in her seat, settling her robes and tossing her hair in a nonchalant fashion. "But of course, Lucius," she said stiffly. "You would object. Unlike the rest of the family, you persist in defending her. Why, anyone could have mistaken a living boy for a dead one. In fact, it is not remarkable I did not repeat her error?"

Several pairs of eyes narrowed and fixed on Lucius, who sunk slightly in his seat. Bellatrix, in the height of her dramatic mood, did not smile.

"It was an honest mistake," Lucius mumbled with a distinct air of having repeated himself a million times over to no avail. He glanced at his little grandson across the table, hoping to see...but no, his eyes were narrowed, too, and he played with his fork stubbornly, as if embarrassed of his aging grandfather.

Losing his composure, Lucius stood rapidly. "I pray you, excuse me. I feel slightly out of sorts this evening." A few people nodded knowingly. Lucius forced a smile and ducked his head in turn, adding, "To the Dark Lord."

Bellatrix smiled broadly at the standard evocation of their leader's name. "Yes, to the Dark Lord... Good night, Lucius."

Lucius did not hesitate to continue directly to the door, pausing for a fraction of a second at Bellatrix's words. Enough was enough. He was off to retire to his room, but that evening, he would not brood or mope as he usually did. If everyone had forsaken him...Draco, his sister's family, his grandson...then it was high time he joined his traitorous wife.

* * * * *

"Harry! Yer alive! He's alive!"

"*Silencio!*" Lord Voldemort shouted.

Bellatrix dragged the boy to his feet, her wand under his chin. She withdrew his only weapon from his robes and tossed it to the side. He did not fight but merely stood limply against her tense form, his eyes fixed solemnly on Lord Voldemort.

"It... it cannot be!" Narcissa said shrilly, a keenly desperate tone in her voice. "I knew not, my Lord, I swear! Please!"

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Voldemort roared. Narcissa's body fell to the earthen floor with a dull thud. Lucius yelped and rushed to her side. Bellatrix released a shrill, screeching laugh.

"How is this possible?" Voldemort hissed, striding towards his captive. "Your mother's protection is destroyed."

"Not entirely," Harry said, a simple smile reminiscent of Dumbledore's on his face.

Voldemort smiled cruelly. "If twice was not enough, I suppose I can continue using the Killing Curse until the spell does the trick."

Several Death Eaters laughed. The ring of spectators closed in. Bellatrix threw the boy to the ground at a glance from her master.

"Now, Harry, before we return to business...and we shall, do not mistake me; if you are immune to *Avada Kedavra*, there are other, slower ways to kill you...you will tell me why you are *not dead*." Lord Voldemort spat out the last two words, his voice dripping with venom. Bellatrix withdrew, joining the ever-tightening ring.

"Tom, I could explain, but you still wouldn't understand," Harry said calmly.

Voldemort's snake-like visage contorted in a spasm of fury. The boy! How Voldemort loathed him, and not simply because of his repeated escapes: no, as much as everything else, the resemblance of his nature to Dumbledore's was almost too much to bear.

"Legilimency it is," he said vociferously, raising the Elder Wand.

Harry eyed it without fear. His gaze, which remained fixed on the legendary wand, was contemplative more than anything else, almost quizzical. "Still not working properly, is it?" he inquired softly.

The Dark Lord took another step toward Harry, who was now at the center of a circle of stationary Death Eaters. He did not lower his wand. Bellatrix waited for him to unleash the *Cruciatius* on the insolent boy between them, but the spell did not come. Voldemort's face betrayed nothing but a calculating gaze.

"Not entirely, it would seem," Voldemort spoke unhurriedly, "but only because you live. Tell me, what other protections have you invoked? I am anxious to lift them."

"It's too late for that," Harry said. "If the wand in your hand can't do the job, none can."

"This wand is unstoppable, Harry," Voldemort corrected. Suddenly, he laughed coldly.

Several Death Eaters started. One glanced towards an adjacent clump of trees with interest and retreated into the shadowed woods.

"Come, come, Harry," Voldemort said loudly. "You are among friends. Please elaborate. It is folly to suggest that I...a wizard who has ventured into magic so intricate and unfathomable that Dumbledore did not dare attempt...armed with the Elder Wand...which I took effortlessly from Dumbledore's corpse...should not be invincible."

"You're wrong, Riddle," Harry returned evenly. "Dumbledore did dare, but he knew better."

"Do not pretend to be wise," Voldemort said evenly. "You have been lucky, yes, and accidents have saved you from death many times over, but that, however, does not make you a learned man any more than it does a particularly crafty sewer rat!"

"Accidents?" Harry demanded, voice rising. "Accidents? Was it an accident that my mother's sacrifice saved my life? And was it an accident that I dueled you in the graveyard and lived to tell the tale? Was it accidental, Riddle, that I came willingly here tonight and that you could not kill me once again? Were these *accidents*?"

"YES! Accidents!" Voldemort cried frenetically. A shudder ran around the ring of supporters as he whirled on his heel and began to pace around the length of the circle.

"So go ahead, Riddle," Harry said loudly. "Kill me. There's no one here to stop you. As you said, you're among friends, if you could call your band of thugs 'friends.' Go ahead."

"I intend to," Voldemort cried, stopping where he stood. "I certainly intend to."

"My Lord!" a voice from outside the circle cried.

Scuffling, followed by a volley of curses, a bang, and silence greeted Harry's ears. Lord Voldemort turned slowly in the direction of the disturbance. "Yes, Nott?"

"I've got someone here! I think it's a Weasley...you should see the hair!" Nott called gleefully, shoving his way past his fellows to the center of the circle.

"A guest? Ah, well," Voldemort said, resuming his satisfied tone. "Escort the prisoner to us."

Nott bowed slightly, bobbing his head in excitement. With a wave of his wand, the floating form of Ginny Weasley, tied up with magical ropes, drifted through the gap in the circle.

Harry's eyes widened fearfully, but he did not attempt to get to his feet; at least a dozen wands were trained on his head. Nagini hissed from her magical cage not far away, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle, who looked intensely uncomfortable with their current assignment.

Nott brought Ginny to a halt a few feet from Harry. She revolved slowly in a circle as if suspended from above. Her toes could almost brush the ground, but her body was frozen in its position: only her eyes signified life. They were fixed on Harry with a look of intensity that drove Voldemort to lower his wand and laugh.

"All too perfect, Nott," he cried. "I am pleased."

"Yes, Master," Nott said, bowing once more. He strolled past Harry to take his place, grinning in satisfaction as he muttered, "Pretty thing, isn't she?"

Harry looked murderous, but he only flinched slightly; several other wands were now aimed at Ginny's heart.

Voldemort approached the girl at a leisurely pace. Once he was close enough to touch her with his wand, he raised his arm and, murmuring several incantations under his breath, waved the Elder Wand in a sweeping, lasso pattern.

Released from her bindings, Ginny fell to the ground. Nagini's hissing increased as the weakened girl stumbled to her feet. She started towards Harry but stopped short as if an invisible wall blocked her path.

"She put up quite a fight," Nott called out. Several Death Eaters jeered. "Unfortunately, I caught little Miss Weasley by surprise!"

"Yes, Nott," Voldemort said in a quelling tone.

Ginny swiveled to face the Dark Lord. She seemed to lose heart as she beheld Voldemort smiling at her maliciously.

Just as Voldemort began to raise the Elder Wand, Harry called out, "It won't work, Voldemort."

Voldemort prepared to reply but changed his mind. "*Crucio*," he said firmly.

Ginny fell to the ground, but she merely tensed, waiting for pain that did not come. As Voldemort twitched his wand, her body jerked from side to side, but she did not cry out.

Lord Voldemort's frustration boiled over: he drew back his wand with an enraged roar. Nagini began spitting angrily.

"You can't hurt them anymore, Riddle," Harry said triumphantly. "I died to save them. I know you're familiar with that sort of protection."

"You are not dead! Silence!" Voldemort yelled.

"Your wand cannot harm me, Riddle. You are not its master. Though you took it from Dumbledore's body, the Elder Wand chose a new master long before. Instead of killing Dumbledore yourself, you brought about his murder indirectly as all cowards do..."

"It does not matter! I killed Severus Snape hours ago."

"Once again, you can't understand. Dumbledore died at a moment of his choosing, planned expressly between him and Snape months before! Severus Snape was never on your side. He served Dumbledore faithfully to the end."

"What does it matter? He is just as dead, and I hold the Elder Wand!"

"Snape loved my mother, Lily Potter, and he was against you from the moment you threatened her! Dumbledore's death was not a murder, and Snape was not the master of the Elder Wand: it was Draco Malfoy."

Voldemort did not speak for a moment. Then, jerkily, he called, "Where is Lucius? I can easily remedy this. Your death is only delayed, Harry..."

But Harry shook his head and continued, "At Malfoy Manor, I disarmed Draco and took his wand. If I'm right, the wand in your hand knows its master's been defeated, so I am the master of the Elder Wand."

Ginny seized her opportunity to speak. "Harry!" she began urgently, only to fall silent under Avery's spell.

"You? The master of the Elder Wand?" Voldemort repeated distastefully. "Well, in that case, I shall use other methods to destroy you. Goyle, step aside..." With a wave of his wand, Voldemort summoned Nagini to his side. "We will begin by feeding the girl to Nagini, who seems to have developed an appetite since our guest's arrival."

"No!" Harry yelled, distress tainting his voice at last.

"You object?" Lord Voldemort asked lazily.

"I will do anything if you spare them...not just Ginny, but all of the people you're trying to destroy..."

"Anything? This is a tall order, Harry, even for such open-ended compensation. The time for bargaining is past."

Nagini hissed. Lord Voldemort prepared to unleash her.

"Stop! Please! Not Ginny, please!"

"How odd... I seem to recall your mother begging me using similar words..."

"Anything. Anything, I swear it..."

"Even an Unbreakable Vow would not satisfy me, Harry, though I admit it would be a shame to spill pure blood, even that of a pathetic blood traitor..."

Bellatrix called from her place in the circle, "My Lord! Recall your designs for the future! For Hogwarts!"

"Oh, yes, Bellatrix, I remember," Voldemort allowed. "Your little project will not go overlooked."

"Thank you, my Lord..."

Voldemort waved his wand, and Harry was pulled roughly to his feet. The prisoner staggered slightly as the Dark Lord nodded to Bellatrix and said in a cold voice, "Well, Harry, I have had a change of heart. I will spare the two of you for the time being."

Harry's face was dumbstruck. "Spare..."

"Yes, Potter, you unintelligent boy, *both* of you. As you have just said you would do anything...quite touching, naturally...I am willing to consider a bargain. I choose the terms. You accept, or Nagini consumes you both. In exchange, I promise never to hurt you or your precious friend," Voldemort finished.

"The terms?" Harry demanded instantly.

Ginny shook her head violently. Goyle sent her a menacing look.

Harry forced himself to concentrate only on the adversary contemplating him bemusedly. "The terms?" he repeated.

Voldemort smiled. "You would swear an Unbreakable Oath, of course... the terms would be thus: that you would never seek to oppose my rule again, that you would uphold my leadership through obedience, and that you would aid me in preventing others from overthrowing me."

Ginny was crying now: unable to leave her invisible cell and unable to speak, she seemed ready to lose control of any remaining shred of composure she possessed.

"Done," Harry said in a resounding voice.

Ginny clutched her head and wept soundlessly. Harry did his best not to look at her as a wave of excitement and shock ran around the ring of Death Eaters.

"Excellent. Bellatrix, approach," Voldemort commanded. "You shall perform the spell."

Bellatrix stepped forward reverently, raising her newly obtained wand. Her sense of glory and honor seeped from her pores, disgusting Harry with its intensity as she waited for the moment to cast the incantation.

Harry and Voldemort knelt, clasping hands. The Dark Lord gripped with force, pouring all his ill will and hatred into their interlocked fingers. Harry seemed equal to the grip; in his mind, he fixed Ginny, safe and sound, in the forefront. Voldemort had promised never to harm her. This condition burned into his every thought, and as he clasped hands with his nemesis, he mustered all his mental strength and focused intently on Ginny and the Dark Lord's promise. Voldemort's eyes were greedy as he nodded to his most dedicated supporter, directing her to commence. Harry set his jaw determinedly as he kept his eyes glued to the connection between the hands that never should have met.