

After the Flames, a Fire

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1-Jan

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The hold he had on her arm was like a vice, rough and unyielding, cutting off all feeling from her wrist to her shoulder. Caught unawares, the tug and whirl of Apparation knocked the wind from her lungs, and when they finally landed – where? – her stomach lodged itself in her throat and left her retching. His solid presence beside her became a sudden, gaping, hollow absence the moment the ground materialized beneath their feet, and it took more strength than she would have thought possible to fight the urge not to reach out in his wake.

Mercurial words from across the chamber made her whole body go rigid as she fought to stand.

“What. Happened.”

“M-my lord...”

In the shadow of a dull, sooty lantern giving off a weak, sputtering glow, she watched as he turned towards her, his eyes bright and menacing, alive with a light of their own.

“A simple mission, Bellatrix. Easy enough for a child to accomplish, and what have you done?”

“But I—”

“Silence.” His wand, raised and pointed at a deadly angle aligned with her heart, quieted her before the command had been voiced. Never, not even in Azkaban, had she felt death so close. But here, huddled on a filthy floor in Merlin-knows-where, she found herself wondering whether this moment would be her last.

He stalked towards her then, his eyes filled with the rage his voice would not betray, and she was powerless to look away. She longed to explain that it wasn’t her fault, at least not hers alone. But her survival depended on her silence, and there were other ways for her lord to learn the truth.

She had risen into a crouching position, balanced on the balls of her feet like a sprinter waiting for the start of a race, but the surge of power as his mind ripped its way into hers was like a tangible blow, and the force of it had her sprawled painfully on her back once more. No gentle, subtle maneuvering, this. His will tore through her defenses and clawed through her silent, panicked pleas until she was sure her head would burst.

Flashes of thought, fleeting images from the previous hours flickered before her. The look on Longbottom’s face when she had emerged from the shadows, the Potter boy’s defiance, the rage that had sprung up from within her like a geyser when he had dared to speak the Dark Lord’s name. And the prophecy, alluding them until the end, and Potter’s voice taunting her, telling her the impossible – it was gone, broken, she had failed.

As the Dark Lord withdrew, casting her memories aside like so much rubbish, she crumpled on the floor at his feet.

"You failed me, Bellatrix," he hissed.

"My lord, forgive me," she panted, pulling herself up so that her knees supported her trembling weight. "There were too many of them. We—"

"You were outnumbered by children," he spat.

"The Order, my lord!"

"The Order," he repeated, "came only at the last moment. Do not tell me there was not ample time to dispense with the mutts. The Dark Lord knows."

A thousand excuses fought to be first out of her lips.

"Lucius..."

"... will be dealt with," he finished, his voice dark with finality. "But you, who profess yourself to be loyal only to me, whose powers were once unparalleled among my forces, failed in a way that Lucius could not."

Blood was streaming from her cheek before she had time to register the descent of his wand as he sent a curse slicing in a deadly diagonal through the air in front of him. Each word he spoke was punctuated with another whiplash of burning, furious power.

"Worthless," he growled as a new line of blood welled up from a gash across her collarbone. "Pathetic," as another slice burning into her right arm, "no better than your Muggle-loving sister and her Mudblood spawn."

The sobs that shivered up her spine threatened to become convulsions as he continued to rail against her tainted bloodline, forcing her to acknowledge her inferiority in the face of his perfection.

"Forgive me. I failed you. Forgive me," she moaned, over and over again, words mixed with blood dripping onto the dirty floor.

"Yes," he replied, his face so close to hers she could feel the heat of his breath on her face. His proximity was disorienting, so much so that by the time his hands were firmly circling her throat, she had only a moment to take a last, gulping breath. She felt her feet rise up off the floor as he squeezed harder, her back scraping against the wall as he brought her face level with his own.

"Please," she gasped, though what she was pleading for – her life, mercy, a quick death – she couldn't tell.

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't kill you now," he purred as her vision began to fade.

Balled fists fell to her side, and she allowed her body to go limp in his grasp.

"My life," she rasped, her eyes seeking his in the growing dark, "is yours to do with as you will."

Her legs went out from under her as he relinquished his hold. Consciousness warred with the sweet oblivion of nothingness as the imprints of his fingers blossomed in cords of black and blue around her neck and the memory of his derision danced through her spinning brain.

Had she, indeed, died? Never in life could she remember him being so close. The same fingers that had so recently been laced in a death grip around her neck now stole her breath in a new way, framing her face and drifting from chin to temples in a lover's caress. Before she could stop herself, she was leaning into that touch, falling against the rough wool of his robe and weeping against his chest. Such wild abandon belonged to a child, but what was she but a child compared to his grace, his majesty, his power?

"Bella," he whispered, somehow managing to make the word sibilant in a way that only he could. "Do not despair."

"No, my lord," she whimpered.

"We will strike again, when they least expect it."

"Yes, my lord."

"You will redeem yourself."

"Oh, yes, my lord!"

He rose then, leaving her clutching at air.

"I must go and reassemble our forces. You will stay to think on your failings. Reflect on my mercy. You have been spared – do not make me regret the gift of your life. And Bella..."

The wordless, wandless Crucio, a baptism of pain, flooded through each limb and coursed through her pulsing veins as she wept tears of joy for her beneficent lord.