

A Little Girl and a Phoenix

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She could still remember the day it happened, all those years ago. Standing in this place now, staring at him, it all flooded back more intense than ever.

It was so long ago, but the emotions still felt raw. She remembered meeting him: her very first pet. It was on a sunny day in June, whilst her family was taking her for a walk in the park. The girl, being an adventurous type, wandered off into a cluster of trees whilst her parents were smoking on a park bench. She can't have been older than six, but even then she was an independent soul.

She often headed off on her own when she got a moment. She could get away with it, since her parents never paid much attention to her. On one occasion whilst her parents were shopping in Flourish and Blotts, she had made her own way down a gloomy alley and into a shop full of dark magic. When she heard someone coming, she dived into the first hiding place she saw: an old dusty cabinet. Next thing she knew, she was in a castle full of teenagers. It was nothing like the shop she'd been in a few minutes ago, and it was horrifying. There were people everywhere, yelling and laughing; and the girl, of age four, was petrified. She crawled quickly into an empty room, closed the door and sat there crying by herself. It was two hours before anyone found her.

That event didn't put her off exploring though. If anything, it made her more determined to escape other people's company whenever she could. And thank goodness it did, or she wouldn't have headed into the trees on that fateful day. And had she not, she would never have found him. He was on the ground amongst a pile of leaves, with a tiny beak and light brown feathers. No bigger than the palm of her hand, the girl may have missed him completely, if it weren't for his timid chirping. She bent down to pick him up, and the crowing stopped. She cupped the young bird in her hands, and stroked him. He was adorable.

Her parents had never let her have a pet. "The house isn't big enough", they said. "We don't have enough time for one", they said. But for the girl, a pet of her own was all she had ever wanted. She didn't have many friends. In fact, if she was being honest, she didn't really have any. She tried to talk to people at school, but never really managed to get on with anyone. Especially since they were muggles. She couldn't see anything wrong with muggles herself, but she couldn't imagine what her parents would say if they found out she was friends with one. They'd almost certainly take her out of school, and possibly lock her in her room again to teach her a lesson. For that reason, she had always craved a companion.

She gingerly placed the baby bird in her pocket, and returned innocently to her parents, who were still finishing their cigarettes, seemingly unaware she had even been missing. The bird started tweeting in her pocket, and she stroked him to quieten him down. It didn't matter though, her parents had got up and started walking off, throwing no more than a cursory glance at their daughter.

For the next few months, she kept the bird in her room - sneaking food from the dinner table when she could to feed him. Over time, it became harder and harder to keep him a secret. After two months, the once teacup sized bird was now the size of a quaffle, and similarly coloured as well. His feathers, initially a dull brown, were now beginning to turn an impressive red, with a few golden flecks. After a month more, he looked truly majestic.

Meanwhile, in spending so much time caring for her new secret pet, the young girl had become incredibly fond of him. She called him Rouge, because of his impressive red plumage. And although she had very little experience of birds, she was certain he was cleverer than the average avian. He always recognised her, and clearly loved her just as much as she did him. At night he would nuzzle up to her, and on the occasions when her dad came home drunk on Firewhiskey and hit her, Rouge would sit on her shoulder and cry along with her. She didn't know why, but his tears seemed to help.

In not too long, Rouge had become too big to stay cooped up in the small bedroom. At night the girl would open the window and let him out to fly. He was also incredibly strong, and was quickly able to pick her up with his talons and lift her right up onto the roof of the house. She would

spend many a night up there, rejoicing in the serenity and silence of the blackness. Occasionally she would fall asleep, and wake up as the sun was rising to Rouge pecking at her cheek. Rouge always knew to get her back before her parents noticed her absence.

One day though, just after New Year, it all went catastrophically wrong. One evening Rouge was getting unusually restless for some reason, and starting crowing loudly. Her parents, who happened to be downstairs at the time drinking cheap pumpkin cider, heard the commotion. Her father burst in, and stared straight down Rouge's open beak.

"That's a bloody phoenix!" He screamed, "what the fuck is that doing here?"

The young girl had no idea what a phoenix was, but what she did know was that she was in awful trouble. She crawled under the covers of her bed, pressed her hands to her ears and allowed her father to scream on. When he finally left, she peaked her head above her duvet and saw Rouge, trapped in his cage in the corner of the room - her father having magically locked it shut.

Early the next day, a middle-aged man turned up to her house wearing purple robes and half-moon spectacles. The man walked into her room, accompanied by her father, and examined the bird in the corner.

"That is indeed a phoenix," the strange man said, "where on Earth did you find it?"

"I don't have a clue do I? Just get it the fuck out of my house," her father said.

"Certainly, Orford." replied the man calmly, "I've always wanted a phoenix, and this one's a beauty." At that point, the man reached into Rouge's cage and stroked his feathers. The girl visibly shuddered at that. Rouge turned its head to her, and looked mournful. The girl started crying.

That was the last she ever saw of Rouge. The strange man with the half-moon glasses picked up the cage and carried him away. For the next two weeks, the girl never left her room. She couldn't sleep, she couldn't eat, she couldn't move. All she did was cry.

The memories still hurt to this day, almost fifty years later. She had never had a friend as good as Rouge. Never had someone for whom she cared so much, and who cared so much for her back.

And now, for the first time in fifty years, she could see him again. There, at the back of the room, standing on a golden perch, was her bird. And between the two of them, the man who had stolen him from her. The man who had taken the best part of her life away. He was visibly older, but clearly the same man. Those half moon glasses had haunted her nightmares for decades. And finally, she was in a position to get her revenge.

"I've waited a long time for this," the girl, now a grown woman, declared. Her eyes glanced back to Rouge at the back of the room. Dumbledore had insisted on calling him Fawkes, but she knew who he really was, and the phoenix did too. A small smile broke across her face as she spoke.

"Albus Dumbledore, by Order of the Ministry of Magic, you are fired as headmaster of Hogwarts, and are to be escorted to Azkaban."

As Dawlish moved to restrain Dumbledore, the woman realised she had not felt this happy for years. Not since that one June day when she'd first met her phoenix. Today, Dolores Umbridge was getting her Rouge back.