

Adventures in Fanfiction



Birds of a Feather

by

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Voyage No. 1



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Flight of the Phoenix



THE PHOENIX WAS MIFFED. IT WAS THE MIDDLE

of the night! It was unnatural, that's what it was. A phoenix is NOT a nocturnal bird, but there he was, flapping along in the dark like some stupid bloody owl.

A phoenix can sense things, and he knew he was needed. It was urgent. The wizard called Severus, the one with the boring black plumage, was trying to carry out the final wishes of Albus Dumbledore, and everything was going wrong. Totally wrong. Yes, he could feel it so very strongly. He'd better hurry.

The phoenix didn't understand wizards very well, even after centuries of observing them. However, he knew that Severus was doing what Albus had wanted. And he knew that if Severus failed, then that cute fledgling wizard called Harry would fail, too. That would be very bad. And Severus was failing. Fawkes could feel the wizard's anxiety growing. He flew as fast as he could.

As Fawkes soared toward Hogsmeade, he thought of Albus. Fawkes had adopted Albus so long ago. He remembered Albus' twinkling eyes and bright, colorful plumage. And his sweets. Yes, those sweets! Especially the lemon drops!

Albus was gone now, but Severus and Harry were still loyal, as loyal any Hufflepuff, and Fawkes prized loyalty. It drew him to them like a magnet. He remembered when young Harry had faced the basilisk. Now he could feel Severus facing the serpent. It was time for him to help again. It's what Albus would have wanted.

Suddenly Fawkes sensed the searing pain and terror as the serpent struck! The Shrieking Shack was just ahead! He dove and nearly lost a few feathers as he plunged through a partially boarded-up window.



Fawkes caught a glimpse of Harry and his friends leaving, and he knew then that Severus had succeeded. But Severus was lying still in a pool of blood. Fawkes was too late! It was over. Poor Severus had been loyal to the very end.

Terrible sorrow overwhelmed the phoenix. He hopped onto the wizard's chest, looked into the blank eyes, and started to cry.

Suddenly the wizard's eyes weren't quite so blank anymore, and then the wounds in his throat began to heal. Maybe he wasn't dead?

The bird's tears turned to tears of joy when Severus gasped for air and started fumbling with his robes. Fawkes fluttered to the side and watched as Severus pulled out a bezoar and choked it down. Then he washed it down with the contents of several potion vials.

That's the way! Good wizard, smart wizard! the bird thought as he hopped up and down on the dirty floor.



The phoenix managed to fly Severus out of the shack, but the wizard was too weak to hold on for very long and he fell into the weeds as soon as they were outside. Clearly, Severus needed to rest for a while, and anyway it was still dark, so Fawkes settled onto the dilapidated fence and started to preen.

Fawkes liked Severus. In some ways Severus reminded him of Albus. Albus had made mistakes when he was little more than a fledgling, bad mistakes, but then he'd realized that. He'd been lost in regret for a time, and then he'd started to change and grow. He'd become powerful and wise, at least until near the end when, in Fawkes' opinion, his thinking



had started to get rather flaky. Wizards had such short lives compared to a phoenix. It was sad. Fawkes had watched so many come and go.

Severus had made bad mistakes when he was young, just like Albus had, and after he finally got the remorse under control, he'd started to grow. He had already become quite powerful, and he even showed a bit of wisdom sometimes, too.

Actually, Severus reminded Fawkes of a vulture, with his plain black plumage and elegant beak. Fawkes liked vultures. They had a certain dignity as they went about their work, cleaning up the nasty things that no one else was willing to touch. Not like those scatter-brained owls, always flitting around with their letters and packages. Fawkes didn't care much for owls.

Albus, on the other hand, had been more like an unusually colourful puffin, but with the heart of a hawk, and the mind of ... well, a common loon, actually. Fawkes missed his Albus. He'd loved the old bird despite his flaws. He would have to find himself a new wizard one of these days. Perhaps he would adopt Severus. It would be interesting to watch the man mature. Severus had more than a century left in him, and he could be quite entertaining at times.

In fact, Severus was quite entertaining when the thestral showed up. Fawkes knew he shouldn't laugh after what the poor fellow had just been through, but he chortled to himself anyway. The thestral had been attracted by the smell of blood, and when it started to nibble at the wizard's blood-soaked cloak it woke him up. When Severus found himself staring into the scaly snout of the thestral, his eyes got as big as dinner plates and he jumped like he'd been hexed. He swore and swatted at the beast. It backed off and watched him expectantly. It was hungry, poor thing.



Then Severus seemed to have an idea. He rummaged in his cloak and started to empty its magic pockets. Fawkes watched as he brought out an assortment of potion vials, some scrolls, a couple of books, a silver dagger — a precaution against werewolves, no doubt — a few sickles and knuts and, yes, a small bag of Albus' favorite lemon drops! They were Fawkes' favorite, too.

Severus got to his feet with difficulty, took off the bloody cloak, and waved it at the thestral. "Come on then, beast!" he sneered, "dinner is served!" He turned and led the thestral into the shack. Fawkes took the opportunity to pounce on the lemon drops.

After a short while Severus returned without cloak or thestral and he slumped down against the side of the shack to rest. Fawkes could sense his plan. Severus wanted to go away and start over somewhere else. He wanted everyone to think he was dead. If anyone came for his body now, they'd find the place a shambles. The floor would be covered with bloody hoof-prints and cloak fragments. It would look like hungry thestrals had consumed Severus's mortal remains. No one would give the matter a second thought.

Fawkes liked the plan. He knew that Severus had done something shocking for Albus. Albus had insisted on it, and the bird understood that it was necessary, but most people wouldn't be eager to forgive Severus. It would be best for him to leave now. Fawkes knew a place where they needed someone who could make medicinal potions, someone who could help them and teach them. Fawkes would adopt Severus and take him there. There was a shaman there who could help him recover and heal.

Fawkes fluttered over to Severus and squawked at him. The sun would be coming up soon. It was time to get moving.



C.S.9 Hogsmeade



H, YUK!" HERMIONE SAID AS SHE STARED

at the filthy floor in the Shrieking Shack. "That's where he was lying when we left. What in the world happened here?" She and Luna had volunteered to go get Snape's body. The boys were busy with the mess at Hogwarts.

Hermione increased the light from her wand and looked around. The floor was covered with tracks and there was no sign of a body.

Luna knelt down for a closer look. "Look at these hoof prints! They look fresh. I think they're from a thestral. I think these funny marks could be tongue tracks."

"You think maybe thestrals ate the body and then licked up the blood?" Hermione was shocked. "That's *disgusting!* We should have come sooner." She ran her finger across one of the tracks and looked at it. "Yes, this looks like dried blood mixed with dirt."

Luna picked up a piece of shredded black fabric. "There are lots of these. They could be from a Death Eater's cloak. But I don't see his wand anywhere. Or his boots. Do you think thestrals would have eaten his boots? Were they leather? Maybe thestrals will eat leather if they're really hungry."

Hermione was crawling around examining the floor closely now. "There are lots of tracks in the dust here. I mean, it's not like anybody's ever cleaned in this place. There are fresh boot prints, they're probably Snape's and Voldemort's, and here are our footprints, too. These big slide marks must have been Nagini. Ewww. There are a few bird tracks, too, I'm guessing a vulture, and some faint wolf tracks; those must have been



Professor Lupin's from a long time ago." There might be some werewolf droppings around, too, and maybe bat guano. She was going to have to scourgify her pants after this.

"I don't think there are any vultures in the British Isles," Luna observed.

"Here's a potion vial. Three of them, in fact." Hermione held one up to the light. The neatly written label said 'Antivenin.' She looked at the other two. Blood Replenishing Potion, and Extra-Strength Pepperup.

A strange look came over Hermione's face. "Uh, Luna, I'm starting to think maybe Professor Snape wasn't dead."

"That's nice," Luna said.

"But Luna, we just left him lying there. We never even *tried* to help him. That's awful!"

"Well, maybe he did all right on his own." Luna took the vials and examined them. "Yes, that's Professor Snape's handwriting. These were his. And they're empty."

Hermione stood up and dusted herself off. "The Professor must have regained consciousness and taken the potions after we left. He dropped the empty vials and discarded his cloak. The thestrals must have got in after that. They licked up the blood and chewed up the cloak. And maybe it wasn't a vulture; maybe it was a phoenix! That would certainly explain a lot of things. We'll have to tell the boys!"

"Um, maybe you should keep that theory to yourself, Hermione," Luna said quietly. "If Professor Snape wanted us to know he's alive he would've contacted us by now. He didn't have any friends, you know, and a lot of people on both sides are going to be very unhappy with him. He'd probably like everyone to think that he doesn't exist anymore. You know, sort



of like a crumple-horned snorkack."

Hermione rolled her eyes at the mention of snorkacks but she realized that Luna had a point. Maybe it would be best to just let the Professor disappear. It was the least they could do, really.

"Come on, Luna," she said. "Let's get out of here. This place gives me the creeps."



As they walked out through the dilapidated fence Hermione stopped and looked back. "I feel so bad about it. He did so much, you know, and he nearly died in there. I wish we could thank him somehow."

"Well," Luna said, "we could wait a while until he gets settled somewhere and then owl him a thank-you note. I'm sure an owl could find him. We could send him a gift-subscription to *The Quibbler*, too."

Hermione tried to imagine the look on the Professor's face when he opened the note.

"Yes, that's a good idea, Luna. Let's do that, but I think maybe we should skip *The Quibbler*. Or maybe not," she mused, as a vision of their much-feared Potions Master wearing spectrespecs and reading *THE QUIBBLER* popped into her head. "Anyway, let's go back to Hogwarts and get cleaned up. We'll tell everyone about the thestral tracks and the missing body, and they can draw their own conclusions."

Luna smiled. It was good to know that the Professor had survived. Too many people hadn't.

The girls took a last look back at the shack. The sun would be setting soon. It was time to get moving.



A Day on the Knight Boat



SEVERUS SNAPE LAY IN A HAMMOCK IN THE

passengers' quarters as the Knight Boat sped through the water. He didn't care where the boat was heading, as long as it was away from the British Isles, away from Hogwarts, away from the Shrieking Shack. It was twice now that he'd faced the fangs of a Dark creature in that shack, twice that he'd barely escaped death there. He wished he'd had the presence of mind to Incendio that filthy hovel before he'd left.

Despite the phoenix tears and an assortment of his own potions, he still felt dreadful. The hellish snake had injected him with a considerable amount of venom, in addition to tearing out part of his throat. He'd been taking antivenin for months before the attack, of course, and he'd taken a full dose of Felix Felicis when Lucius had summoned him to the Dark Lord, too, but his precautions had barely been adequate. He was surprised that he was still alive.

It wasn't completely clear to him why the Dark Lord had suddenly turned on him like that. It was some nonsense about owning the Elder Wand. The man was totally mad. The Elder Wand was just a myth, wasn't it?

He remembered how he'd been terrified that he'd die without being able to reach Potter. He'd thought all was lost, but then the boy and Granger had suddenly appeared out of nowhere. He didn't believe in miracles; it must have been the Felix Felicis kicking in at last.

It wasn't clear why the phoenix had come to him, either. He'd sacrificed everything to carry out Dumbledore's plan, of course, sometimes against his better judgment, but despite the fact that he had risked his life repeatedly in the struggle against the Dark Lord, he knew that Albus



Dumbledore had never really cared for him. Fawkes must have come of his own accord. Perhaps that was the Felix Felicis, too.

He wondered what had happened at Hogwarts after the snake had attacked him. He supposed that Potter was dead by now — he was surprised how much that thought pained him — and he passionately hoped that the Dark Lord was dead, too. There was nothing more he could do now, in any event. He was too weak. He never would have made it to the boat if it hadn't been for the phoenix.

He'd expected the bird to leave after it had flown him out of the shack, but the phoenix had stuck around. It had shepherd him to the lake and squawked at him until he'd stuck out his wand to call a Knight Boat. When the boat popped up out of the lake, the bird had accompanied him on board and it was probably still around somewhere. He knew that because he'd heard someone in the galley yelling, "That darned bird ate all of our after-dinner mints!" It could only have been Fawkes. Owls don't like mints, and the captain's parrot probably didn't, either.

Well, it didn't matter. Fawkes was an extremely powerful and nearly immortal magical creature, but he was still a bird, and his brain was probably a bit smaller than a wet teabag. There was no point in trying to make sense of him.

Severus listened to some of his fellow passengers betting on a game of chess as he slowly went back to sleep. He wondered if he'd have any more weird dreams like that one about Merlin in King's Cross station. Where had that come from, anyway? It must have been delirium, from the poison and the potions.



The Knight Boat looked somewhat like the Yellow Submarine in the old Beatles cartoon, except that it was purple, the Fab Four were nowhere to be seen, and the crew sometimes tried to talk like pirates, even though they were actually from places like Pittsburg. Usually the boat stayed submerged, but today it was running on the surface because the weather was good and there were no Muggle vessels in the area.

The captain — Captain Clark — had invited the new passenger with the black robes to stay on board for as long as he liked after the fellow had hexed a swarm of doxies out of the bilge. “Those darned things been down there for a couple o’ decades,” he remarked to the cook, “and nothing anybody did ever fazed ‘em in the slightest. Then that bloke comes along and he runs ‘em off like there’s nothing to it, just because their buzzin’ annoyed ‘im. A bloke like that could be handy to have around if there’s trouble.”

Doxies are remarkably curse-resistant, of course, but they didn’t stand a chance against a wizard who’d spent many years in the service of the Dark Lord. Not that Captain Clark or his crew knew much about the Dark Lord. None of them were British, and although they’d heard that there was some sort of wizarding war going on there again, they weren’t much interested in ‘politics’ and hadn’t bothered to follow the news.

“That feller, he says his name is Slade. Solomon Slade. Do ya suppose that’s his real name?” said the cook, who insisted on calling himself ‘Seabiscuit’. “He’s got that vacant look, ya know, like folks get when they’ve lost everything.”

“Well, he’ll fit right in with us then,” Clark said. “But that bird of his is a nuisance. It keeps pecking at the navigational charts. It’s starting to wear a hole in one of ‘em. It’s a phoenix, I know, but still...”

Seabiscuit laughed. “I know; the fool thing ate all of our mints, too.



Maybe it’s just trying to show ya where it wants to go. But a phoenix ain’t something that ya just pick up at yer local Owl Emporium. The phoenix chooses the wizard, after all, not vice versa. Which just shows ya how powerful that guy must be. Most wizards have never even seen a phoenix. This guy’s got one that follows him around.”

Captain Clark nodded. Yes, Mr Slade might be good to have aboard. And his bird, too.





A Moment with Minerva



FAWKES WAS STILL WORRIED ABOUT HIS WIZARD.

It must have been an extremely difficult time for Severus, trying to carry out Albus' plan all alone, and it had culminated in that terrible attack in the Shrieking Shack. The poor man had to be traumatized. Fawkes knew a shaman who could help him come to terms with what he'd been through, but first he had to get Severus to the man's village, and Severus was showing no inclination to go anywhere at all.

Repeated attempts to show the captain where he wanted to go had achieved nothing. Captain Clark was either too stupid to understand, or he was deliberately ignoring Fawkes' attempts to communicate. Fawkes suspected the latter. The captain was something like a big seabird, he thought. A skua, perhaps. Skuas are quite smart, and fierce, too, although they're nothing compared to a phoenix, of course.

So Fawkes and his wizard were stuck on this stupid boat. It was frustrating.

But things could be worse. At least the crew seemed to be trying to look after Severus in their own peculiar way. Severus had no appetite, but Seabiscuit the cook somehow managed to nag him into eating more or less regularly anyway.

The cook also kept trying to bribe Fawkes with sweets. He made a really good dessert thing called pecan pie, and Fawkes was becoming quite fond of it.



Severus stared out the porthole watching the sun rise. His physical injuries from Nagini's attack were mostly healed, except for some jagged



red scars on his throat, but the damage to his soul remained. Perhaps, given enough time, it could heal. He wasn't sure. He didn't know much about souls. Maybe nobody did. Albus had certainly been no help in that regard. If the old man had known anything he'd kept it to himself.

Thinking of Albus reminded him of Hogwarts. He'd sworn to himself that he was going to put his past behind him, including Hogwarts. Especially Hogwarts. He was going to forget it all and start over, but the memories kept popping up, as memories always do.

Had the school survived? Who would be Headmaster now? Minerva would probably take the helm, assuming she survived. The old Gryffindor was certainly annoying but she was quite competent, in her own stuffy way. He almost smiled when he remembered how she'd attacked him. She could still put up a good fight. He hoped she was all right. And Filius. And Sprout. And the rest of the staff.

He was going to have to find a copy of THE DAILY PROPHET somewhere.



A tear trickled down Minerva's cheek and she smiled as she stared at the portrait. She'd always been a hopeless romantic and she was a sucker for tragic tales of love gone wrong. She'd been rocked when Harry told her the story of Snape's hopeless love for Lily. He'd lived it right under her nose and she never even knew, never imagined that he'd had that kind of depth. In fact, she'd never imagined that any Slytherin had that kind of depth. She was going to have to try to be a wee bit more open-minded about Slytherins after this.

That was going to take some effort. She'd never liked Slytherins. In



fact, it would be fair to say that she strongly disliked them. All of them. She always took points from them whenever she could. That was probably where Snape had learned it, when he was still a student. And when he became a Professor — she'd been furious when Albus had hired him — he'd made a point of beating her at her own game. Oh, that had made her so angry! As fast as she could take points from Slytherin, he'd take them from Gryffindor even faster. She'd never missed an opportunity to lecture Albus on what a presumptuous young upstart he was.

She remembered what he'd been like when he'd first arrived at Hogwarts as a boy, so thin and ragged and suspicious of everyone, but so excited, too. Within a year he'd shed all traces of that Muggle accent he'd had. He was always in the library and quickly fought his way to the top of his class. She could never find fault with his work, although she'd certainly tried. She'd chalked it up to Slytherin ambition, but perhaps it wasn't really a vice to want to make something of oneself.

She couldn't imagine what it must have been like for him, all those years after Lily's death. The pain must have been unceasing, unbearable. His suffering had been so tragic, so beautiful, so noble. She mopped another tear with her handkerchief.

And then, horror of horrors, he'd been forced to kill Albus! He'd tried to refuse, Harry had told her, but when the time came, Snape didn't really have much choice, did he? Had Albus planned it that way, or had it just been Snape's bad luck? It must have shredded the poor man's already damaged soul. And what purpose had it served? It had got Snape appointed as Headmaster, of course, but it had also marked him for death as the master of the Elder Wand. She wondered how Snape had





reacted when Albus told him about that part.

And why had Albus told *her* nothing? Nothing about the Horcruxes, nothing about the Elder Wand? She could have helped, if she'd known. Helped hunt the Horcruxes, and helped Snape when he was Headmaster. It hurt to realize that Albus hadn't trusted her enough to tell her.

Snape's year as Headmaster must have been horrid for him, being unable to protect the students properly without giving himself away. It had certainly been horrid for her and the other teachers. But in hindsight, it was obvious that he'd been helping them discretely, behind the scenes. Why had she not seen it at the time? Perhaps because she'd wanted to think the worst of him. He'd certainly gone out of his way to be as infuriating as possible and it had been a very effective strategy.

It had been madness to attack Severus the way she had, but she'd been so overwrought from the unrelenting stress of it all that she hadn't been thinking clearly. After all, she knew perfectly well that she wasn't as fast or as strong as she used to be, and Filius probably wasn't, either. Neither of them had practiced dueling in ages. It was fortunate that Severus hadn't sent both of them to join Albus. (And just when had she started thinking of him as 'Severus' instead of 'Snape' anyway?)

She shuddered to think of the way that he'd died. That filthy, hideous snake! It was dreadful! He'd been so brave, and so alone.

And then, to top it all off, the Prince family patriarch, old Reginald Prince himself, had turned up with his solicitor in tow, demanding the body "to entomb with honour in the Prince family mausoleum." She hadn't known whether to laugh or hex the old fool. The Princes had disowned his mother and never acknowledged his existence, but now that



he'd been publicly acclaimed as a hero and there was talk of the Order of Merlin, they suddenly wanted to claim him as their own. A bunch of hypocrites, that's what they were!

When she explained why the body was not available, the old codger had demanded "some of his relics." Relics? So she'd fetched a set of his dress robes, and she'd even transfigured a nice silver cloak-pin to put on them — the Princes would never know that it hadn't belonged to Severus. They could put *that* in their musty old crypt!

The portrait's dark eyes seemed to stare back at her from the canvas. He looked elegant in his black teaching robes, just as he had in life (she'd always assumed he'd learned poise by watching that horrible Lucius Malfoy). His right hand held his wand, and his left held a potions book to his chest.

Why hadn't the portrait become animated yet? It had been completed by Wizarding Britain's foremost portrait artist, after all; Harry had insisted on the best. Perhaps it would come alive tomorrow at the official unveiling ceremony.

She wiped another tear from her eye and poured herself a wee dram of whiskey. "Here's to you, Severus," she said, raising the glass. Severus Snape had finally earned her respect. It was too bad he wasn't around to appreciate that fact.





News from Home



TECHNICALLY, HIS STUDENT YEARS AT HOGWARTS

had been the best years of Severus's life, but given the way his life had gone, that wasn't saying much. He had enjoyed his studies, of course, and there had been the wonderful moments when Lily had still been his friend, but that had ended in disaster.

Everything had changed after the 'prank' in the Shrieking Shack. That was when he'd realized that his life meant nothing to any of them. Even Lily didn't seem to really care. That was when the balance had tipped and he'd started heading down the path to the Dark Lord.

Thinking back on it, Severus realized what he should have done that night so long ago: he should have bared his throat to the werewolf. He would have died with his throat ripped out, in a pool of his own blood, but would that have been so much worse than what Nagini had done to him? It would have got James Potter and his pals kicked out of Hogwarts, right along with dear old Albus Dumbledore. Severus would have been dead, of course, but Lily might still be alive. She might have married someone decent. And the Dark Lord? Well, he would have been someone else's problem.

His gloomy thoughts were interrupted by the First Mate, a young man who called himself Katfish.

"Hey, Slade," Kat said, thumping him on the shoulder, "come on down to the mess and have some tea. We picked up some really primo tea when we stopped in Mumbai."

Severus considered hexing the fellow but decided it would be unwise under the circumstances. Anyway, perhaps some tea wouldn't be such a bad thing. Glumly, he followed Kat to the mess.



Kat was right; the tea was indeed excellent. Severus was savoring his second cup when an owl flew in through a porthole, dumped a package in front of him, and flew out again. They must be somewhere near the British Isles, he realized. There are limits to how far an owl can fly across open water. Seabirds might agree to take mail occasionally, but for the most part, trans-oceanic messages had to go by portkey or, for low-priority deliveries, by ship. Knight Boats usually carried more mail and freight than passengers.

Who could be sending him something? It looked like a letter and a newspaper, wrapped up together. Someone must suspect that he'd survived! It was probably a death threat or an attempt at blackmail. He'd better not open it in front of the crew. Casually, he put it aside and took another sip of his tea.

"Hey, that looks like *The Quibbler*," Seabiscuit said. "Can I have it when you're done? *The Quibbler* has the Confounding Cryptogram puzzle." The cook loved puzzles, and the Confounding Cryptogram was one of his favorites.

"When I'm finished," Severus replied. Why in the world would a black-mailer be sending him *THE QUIBBLER*? He slid the note and the newspaper into one of his magic pockets, finished his tea, and set out to find a private place to read.



"Birdie num-nums!" Seabiscuit said, proffering a tray of sweets. Fawkes accepted the offering, of course. It brought back memories of ancient Egypt, where the priests used to bring him honey cakes and



dates. They considered him sacred to the sun. Sometimes they would sing to him. He hoped the cook wouldn't sing.

Fawkes knew exactly what the man was up to. He wanted to collect droppings, and the more he fed the phoenix, the more droppings there would be. Phoenix droppings were not as valuable as phoenix tears, but they were still worth a bundle on the potions market. Albus had always used the money for the Hogwarts library fund. The cook had been buying top-quality groceries, exotic teas, and fine wines for the mess, and then giving the remainder of the profit to Severus. There was no harm in that, Fawkes supposed, as he sampled another sweet.



Severus slipped into the cargo hold, chased out the ship's kneazle, cast some privacy wards, and sat down on a crate. By the light of his wand he could see that the envelope was addressed in a neat, feminine hand that looked vaguely familiar.

He cast the spells to see if it was poisoned or cursed before he opened it cautiously and read:

Dear Professor Snape... hope this finds you well... want to thank you so much... appreciate everything you've done... won't mention this to anyone... (Good!)... if there's anything we can do...

Hermione and Luna.

Granger and Lovegood? Well, that explained THE QUIBBLER.

As idiotic as THE QUIBBLER was on some topics, its news was sometimes more reliable than anything in THE PROPHECY. The front page proclaimed Voldemort's defeat in huge letters, and beneath that was a list



of the dead surrounded by a thick black border. The list was so long that it continued onto page 2. The names were in alphabetical order with no regard to which side the deceased had been on. Severus was on the list. So was Tom Riddle, under 'R' on page 2. Riddle was also listed under 'V' for 'Voldemort', although not under 'Y' for 'You-Know-Who'.

Potter wasn't on the list! Severus scanned the 'P's twice to make sure. Against all odds, the boy must have survived, although he couldn't imagine how, and the Dark Lord had perished anyway. Severus felt a wave of relief wash over him.

He was relieved to see that there were no Malfoys on the list, either, and none of the Hogwarts Professors. But Nymphadora was there, and Lupin... a Weasley... Bellatrix... Crabbe... Creevey... Severus knew most of the dead, one way or another, except for a few of the House-Elves and other non-humans. His colleagues. His enemies. His students. He felt sick to his stomach.

Severus stared at the list for a long time, lost in thought. When he finally looked up, Fawkes was perched on a crate across from him. It made him think of the Muggle poet Poe and the raven that had haunted him.

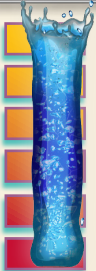
"How did you get in here?" he muttered, scowling at the phoenix.

Fawkes cocked his head, looked at Severus with one golden eye, and then he began to sing.





Song of The Phoenix



IN THE TIME THAT THEY'D BEEN TOGETHER, FAWKES

had chirped, peeped, squawked, twittered, chortled, crowed, and even shrieked a few times, but this was the first time that Severus had heard him sing. It was like nothing Severus had ever heard before. It was haunting and strangely beautiful. It was also a bit hypnotic. The melody seemed to penetrate to his soul. The tension started to drain from his body. His mind began to drift. He began to dream.

He was back in King's Cross station again. Or maybe he'd never left. Light was pouring down from above and a wizard in dark blue robes was standing there, looking at him. He knew it was Merlin. He'd always thought that Merlin would be much older, but he didn't know why. Time was such a funny thing.

"Is the train due yet?" Severus asked. "I should leave. I'm finished now." But where was he going? Who would be there? Suddenly he felt lost.

Merlin smiled, and it gave him a strange feeling of déjà vu. "Finished? Oh, no, I don't think so. As I've said, your train isn't due for quite a while yet. You could wait here, I suppose, but really, you ought to go back. There's so much to do."

"No one would want me back," Severus said harshly. He wondered why Merlin was speaking contemporary English, rather than ancient Welsh or Cornish or something.

"Well, you can be rather acerbic," Merlin noted. "However, one rarely sees such a fine example of courtly love these days. You took a rather ordinary young girl and made her into a symbol of everything that's right and good."

Courtly love? Severus nearly choked. He tried to protest, but the words wouldn't come. Remorse overwhelmed him. He'd been such a fool.





"You've been so faithful to the ideals that she represents for you," the ancient wizard told him. "Just like one of Arthur's knights. You've tried to rectify the mistakes you made, you've shown great courage, and your soul has grown in the process. It's so nice to see. You still carry her tokens, do you not?"

Severus looked down and the torn fragments of the letter and the photograph were in his hand. Lily waved from the photograph.

Merlin was starting to remind him of Minerva when she'd been reading those trashy romance novels. "I stole those," Severus told him, "and I doubt that there's anything left of my soul."

Merlin smiled. "Your soul certainly did suffer a lot of damage, and much of it was self-inflicted, as you know. But as I said, your soul has grown since then, battered and imperfect though it may be, and it will heal as you continue on your quest."

"My 'quest' is over and done with," Severus snapped.

Merlin smiled at him. "Well, that depends on what you think your quest is." Now the man was starting to sound like Albus Dumbledore.

Merlin slowly faded away, except for his smile.



Severus awoke with a start. He was surprised to find that he'd drifted off to sleep. Fawkes was staring at him. He remembered the bird singing. Then he remembered the dream. He'd dreamed of Merlin again. In King's Cross station, of all crazy things. It was meaningless, of course. He did feel somewhat better, though. He must have needed the rest.

Severus reached over and gently stroked the bird's neck. The red and gold feathers sparkled in the wandlight, and Fawkes closed his eyes and



twittered happily. Severus frowned. The bird had better not want to sit on his shoulder or anything like that. It was larger than a peacock and probably twice as heavy.

Severus tore out the Puzzle Page to give to the cook and then he tucked the rest of THE QUIBBLER into one of his magic pockets. His hand touched the pieces of the letter and the photograph. He'd always known that it was foolish, but the illusion that she'd loved him had given him the strength to carry on during those terrible days after he'd been forced to kill Albus. He'd been totally alone, struggling to protect whomever he could while trying to placate the Dark Lord. And all the while he'd been tormented by the certainty that he was doomed.

Severus pulled out the fragments, crushed them in his hand, and turned to the porthole to drop them into the sea, but a quick glance reminded him that the Knight Boat was currently submerged. Well, it could wait. He smoothed out the fragments and tucked them back into his pocket.



During the next few days the Knight Boat stopped in Hong Kong, Detroit, Santiago, Melbourne, Lake Baikal, and several hidden places with names so secret that nobody knew them. Cargo was picked up and delivered. Passengers came and went.

Severus kept busy helping Katfish renew and strengthen the ship's many protective spells. There were spells to repel icebergs, charms to hide the ship from Muggle eyes, spells to prevent leaks, and even spells against barnacles. The strongest and most complicated were the wards against sea monsters.



"We've gotta transfigure your clothes into something more suitable for seafaring," Kat declared.

Severus gave him a look that would have curdled milk. "They're fine the way they are," he growled.

Surprisingly, Kat didn't back down. Perhaps he would have been in Gryffindor, had he ever been sorted. "We've at least gotta charm your boots so they stick to the deck better. Or do you wanna sleep with the fishes?"

Reluctantly, Severus realized that Kat had a point. And it proved to be a slippery slope.

Kat had a magic sea-chest filled with Muggle clothes and pirate regalia. The only clothes Severus had were the ones he'd been wearing when he fled from the shack. He'd been cleaning and repairing them with magic every night.

"Here," said Kat, tossing Severus a pair of Muggle jeans and a black t-shirt. He dug deeper into the chest and pulled out a turtleneck sweater, some rain gear, a pea coat for cold weather, and a tank-top for working in the tropics. "And here's a bandana to keep the sun off your neck." Kat assumed that Severus would actually want it to hide those nasty scars. It looked like someone had tried to cut the man's throat with one of those Muggle chainsaw things.

Next came several packages of underwear and socks from a Muggle place called WAL-MART. "How about some pirate gear?" Kat asked, grinning. "You'd look kind of like Basil Rathbone in Captain Blood. That would be really cool. The ladies would love it!"

Severus had no idea what the young wizard was talking about. "Keep that up, and you're going to sleep with the fishes," he snarled, glaring at



the clothes. He'd have to turn most of them black. Especially that stuff from WAL-MART. He stalked off to change.



The trouble started one night when they stopped in Dublin and picked up a few passengers. It wasn't unusual for the boat to pick up dodgy passengers. Knight Boats are the favored mode of transportation for witches and wizards who want to travel long distances without attracting attention.

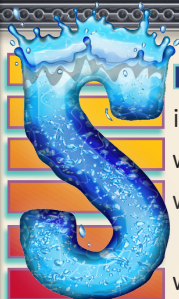
When they can't apparate because the distance is too great, most people go by portkey. It's fast and reliable, but it's also rather pricey, and the authorities keep track of all the comings and goings. By broom, there is always the danger of falling asleep and crashing during long flights across mountains and oceans. And to travel by Muggle means, one needs Muggle money and Muggle identification. So Knight Boats are often the best option: they're affordable, reliable, and the crews don't ask too many questions.

Most suspicious travelers tend to keep to themselves because they don't want to be noticed. This bunch was different, however. They went straight up to the bridge, pulled their wands on the captain, and hijacked the ship.





Pirates



SEVERUS, KATFISH AND SEABISCUIT WERE SITTING

in the mess playing three-way wizard chess (Severus was winning, of course) when three of the hijackers burst in with drawn wands.

"Nobody move!" Dolohov shouted as they pointed their wands.

Everyone froze, including Severus. There was no way they could draw their wands fast enough and they knew it. Severus was furious. He'd been caught unprepared. He'd become too complacent on the boat. It had seemed so safe. In the old days he would have had his wand in the sleeve of his robes, or even out on the table. Tonight he was wearing a short-sleeved t-shirt, and he'd stuck the wand in his boot. With his feet under the table, there was no way he could reach it in time.

It took a moment before Dolohov realized who he was looking at. His mouth dropped open and his eyes bugged out. "You!" he said. "They said you were dead!"

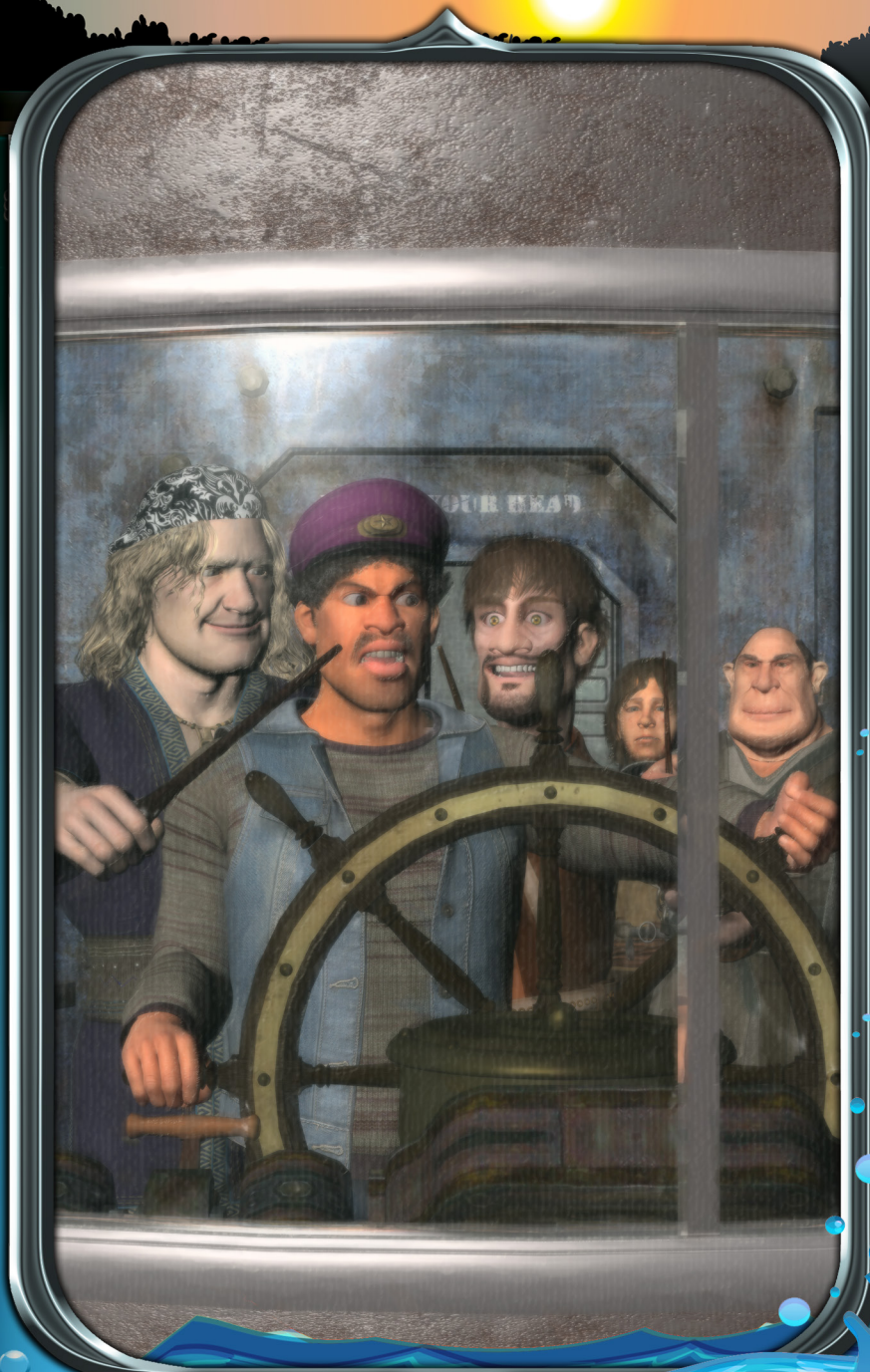
"Hello Anton," Severus said calmly. "And Thorfinn... Stan. What an unexpected surprise."

Kat and Biscuit looked at each other.

"Search him, Shunpike," Dolohov ordered. "Get his wand. Then do the others. And be careful! That lying half-blood scum betrayed us."

Dolohov and Rowle kept Severus covered while Shunpike searched him and took his wand.

"I betrayed the Dark Lord because he tried to kill me," Severus told them. "He set that filthy snake of his on me and I don't even know why. So yes, I betrayed him. I thought I was dying and I wanted revenge, so I





did my best to send Potter after him. You'd have done the same. I have no quarrel with the rest of you."

"No?" Dolohov sneered. "So the rest of us were just, what do they call it? Collateral damage? Anyway, Potter said you betrayed us years before that, all because you loved his mommy."

Severus laughed at that. "Potter will believe anything, especially stories about his beloved mommy. It's almost too easy to deceive him. Dumbledore lied to him for years, and the brat never caught on." Unfortunately, it wouldn't be nearly as easy it to deceive Dolohov.

Dolohov snorted and turned his attention to the others. "Who are you two?" he demanded.

"I'm the First Mate," Katfish said cautiously, "and this guy is the cook. Slade here is, um, our navigator."

"Slade, is it?" Dolohov chuckled. "That's a good one. I like it!"

He turned to Kat. "My friends and I have no place to go at the moment. We have to keep moving or the Aurors will catch up with us. So we thought we'd take up piracy for a while. You can join us, or you can walk the plank, as they say. So what'll it be?"

Kat figured that the hijackers needed them to run the boat, but he thought he'd be pushing his luck to say so. "Sure thing," he said. "We've been thinking about turning pirates anyway, haven't we, Biscuit? Knight Lines is a bunch of cheapskates. They don't pay us anywhere near what we're worth."

Severus was glad to see that he wasn't the only one with a talent for lying.

"Knight Lines?" piped up Stan, who was covering them from behind. "Knight Lines is a bunch of crooks! I used to work for those gits. Everybody hates 'em!"

"You bet!" said Biscuit, trying to sound enthusiastic.



Dolohov smiled. "Good. That's the kind of talk I like to hear. But I'm not sure we can trust your friend 'Slade' over there. I think we may have to do away with him."

Severus appeared unperturbed. "Nonsense," he said. "I would be quite useful to you, as you well know. I'm not going to turn on you. I'm in the same situation that you are. It would be unwise for me to return to Britain, so I'm looking for new opportunities. The crew and I have been considering piracy, but up until now, we didn't have enough manpower. If we join your group, we would be a very effective force."

"Perhaps," Dolohov said. "I'll have to think about it. Are you three all of the crew? Are there others? What about passengers?"

"We're all of it," Severus told him. He knew that the Death Eaters would find out anyway. He told him about the couple from Melbourne, too. "They're the only passengers at the moment. They're in the passengers' quarters. We can hold them for ransom." If Dolohov thought they were worth something, maybe he wouldn't kill them.



"Have you seen this?" Harry asked, holding up *THE DAILY PROPHET*. He was having breakfast with Ron and Hermione. They were back at Hogwarts to help with the rebuilding. Even with magic, it was going to be quite a challenge getting the school ready to reopen on time.

"The Prince family held a big ceremony to honour Snape. They made sure that *The Prophet* was there, of course."

"Pureblood snobs," Ron muttered, as he poured another glass of pumpkin juice.



"Yeah," said Harry. "Listen to this: Reginald Prince claims that Snape 'showed the power of the Prince family's pure blood', because he did heroic deeds despite the 'taint of Muggle influence'. Then he went on and on about all their famous ancestors, including the Sheriff of Nottingham. Did you know that they claim descent from Sir Mordred?"

"No, but I can believe it," said Ron. "Anybody want some more sausages?"

"Anyway, he called Snape 'a worthy son of the Prince family'. I wish Snape was still around. I'd give anything to see his reaction to that. From a safe distance, of course."

Hermione smiled and buttered a piece of toast.



The Death Eaters made the captain anchor off an uninhabited island while they searched the ship. It turned out that there were only four of them, the forth being Yaxley, who had stayed on the bridge to watch the captain.

Dolohov broke the wards on the cargo, and Yaxley and Rowle stood guard over everyone while Shunpike searched through the crates. It was painfully clear that the Death Eaters were not going to trust any of them, not even for one split second.

"It's just a bunch of junk," Shunpike said in disgust. There were several crates of potion herbs, a shipment of exotic hardwoods for making wands, some crates of books in foreign languages, and a few sacks of mail. None of it appeared to be particularly valuable.

When they were done, Dolohov locked the two startled passengers in the cargo hold and set the wards. The passengers had been smart enough to tell him that their son was a famous mediwizard who wouldn't



hesitate to pay a huge ransom. Maybe it was even true.

Next they searched the captain's cabin. While he watched them, it occurred to Severus that Fawkes was by far the most valuable thing on the ship. If Dolohov found the bird, he'd want to sell him for potion ingredients. Phoenixes are extremely rare, and phoenix parts almost never appear on the market. There were rich collectors who would gladly pay ridiculous amounts to have a genuine phoenix eye in a glass jar to display on their mantelpiece.

He'd have to find a way to protect Fawkes. And the crew, of course. It wasn't that he *liked* the bird. Of course he didn't. The thing had no sense. None at all. The fact that it had devoted itself to Albus Dumbledore for several decades was proof enough of that. And if that wasn't stupid enough, now it was following Severus around. Clearly, it was crazy. However, the phoenix had saved his life. He ought to return the favor.

"Nothing here," said Dolohov. So far they'd found no valuables and no weapons. It was disappointing, to say the least. "Move along and keep looking. There must be something valuable somewhere on this stupid ship."





Fish and Chips



FAWKES WAS SLEEPING WHEN THE CABIN DOOR

swung open. It was night by ship's time, but with the vessel jumping magically between time zones and latitudes, daylight and darkness came at random. Fawkes tended to make a racket whenever it got light, and no one appreciated being awakened at odd times by a crowing bird, so Severus had hung a curtain in front of Fawkes' perch to keep it dark for him.

Fawkes yawned, stretched his wings, and peeked around the edge of the curtain. What was this disturbance? Severus usually came in quietly.

Fawkes watched as Severus and the seafarers entered the cabin, followed by four strangers. He didn't like the look of the strangers. The oldest one had a long face and was heavily built, and reminded him of a baboon. He was being very bossy. There was also a big blond one, a tall one, and a sullen young pup.

Before they could notice Fawkes peering at them, Severus walked over and stood in front of him, blocking him from view.

Fawkes was annoyed. How was he to see with Severus standing in front of him? He was being ignored and he was *not* going to put up with it. Maybe he should give Severus a peck. He craned his neck to see around the wizard, but fortunately the Death Eaters didn't notice. They were busy joking about a pirate hat that they'd found in Kat's sea chest.

Furtively, Severus reached behind him and shoved Fawkes back behind the curtain. The bird promptly bit him. Severus didn't flinch. He'd endured Crucio from the Dark Lord, after all, and a phoenix bite was nothing by comparison. None the less, it hurt more than he would have thought, and it was probably bleeding. He thrust the wounded hand into



his pocket. Stupid bird!

There wasn't much to search in Severus's cabin. Stan sneered at a pair of the now-black briefs from WAL-MART, and tossed them back into the locker. "Nothing here," he said.

"Let's get on with it then." Dolohov was getting hungry, and they still had to search the cook's quarters and the kitchen.

Fawkes considered emitting an ear-splitting shriek to show his displeasure. This was *not* how a phoenix expects to be treated. Then he realized that he was in the dark again, so he did what any sensible bird would do: he fluffed his feathers, closed his eyes, and went quietly back to sleep.



Seabiscuit cooked fish and chips for everyone while Yaxley watched over him to make sure that he didn't slip any poisons or potions into the food. The cook smirked, knowing that they hadn't searched his kitchen thoroughly enough to find his charmed liquor cabinet. He didn't want to see any of his good wine and brandy wasted on this nasty bunch of pirate-wannabes. It was too bad that he didn't have a spare wand or two stashed in there along with the booze.

Dolohov eyed the crew while he ate. He was ready to strike them down if any of them made a suspicious move. They all seemed to be Americans, except for Snape, of course. There probably wasn't a single drop of pure blood in any of them. The captain obviously had some African blood, and there was no telling what the other two were. They were just a pack of mongrels. Pirates were supposed to be mongrels, he knew, but really, it was rather distasteful. Dolohov himself came from an old eastern Euro-



pean pureblood family and he was a graduate of Durmstrang.

Captain Clark poured some ketchup on his fries and made sure that he looked unconcerned, even though he was seething inside. In his many years at sea, he'd fought off his share of sea monsters, and pirates, too, but these guys had simply strolled onto his bridge, disarmed him, and hijacked his ship. The nerve of them! He felt like a fool. He'd find a way to take back the Knight Boat, or he'd die trying. They'd regret the day they'd set foot on his ship.

Rowle helped himself to more fish. Things had been so good before the Dark Lord had got himself killed. Rowle had loved all the torturing and killing. There had been lots of loot, too. The Dark Lord always let them keep whatever they stole from their victims. But now they were on the run and they had nothing. He hoped Dolohov would let him kill someone soon. Snape, for example. He needed to take his pent-up anger out on someone.

Kat sipped his coffee and looked over at Seabiscuit. These jerks must be some of those Death Eater guys that Slade had spied on. Yeah, he and Biscuit knew about that. Biscuit had picked up a DAILY PROPHET to get the Wizard's Weekly Word Puzzle, and even though he didn't usually read the thing, it was hard to miss the picture of Slade scowling from the bottom of the front page. There was a full-page story inside about how his name was Snape, how he'd been a Professor and a double agent, and been killed, and been given some medal, and all that. They hadn't mentioned it to him, of course, because he obviously didn't want to talk about it, but they'd showed the story to Captain Clark.

Yaxley poured some vinegar on his second helping of chips. He was looking forward to some action. He wasn't sure how much shipping the wizarding world was doing these days, but he'd read stories about



Muggle sailing ships that carried rich cargos of gold and jewels. They would be easy prey. Being a pirate would be even more fun than being a Death Eater. He could hardly wait!

Stan Shunpike gobbled down his food and then sat staring at his empty plate. How had he got himself into this mess? His family was poor, but their blood was pure. The Dark Lord's minions had promised him a better life (and maybe a Veela or two), and Stan had believed them and joined up. It hadn't taken him long to figure out that he'd made a terrible mistake, but it was too late. After he'd botched a simple courier mission, they had told him he was a useless bungler and then they'd Imperiused him. He wasn't sure what had happened after that. He'd better owl his mom and dad and tell them he was all right.

Severus watched the Death Eaters out of the corner of his eye while he ate. Dolohov was the most dangerous. He'd served the Dark Lord since the early days. He was cunning, ruthless, and powerful. Yaxley was a bit crazy, Rowle was a brainless thug, and Shunpike was a desperate kid who got in over his head. Shunpike was the weakest link, but it would be a mistake to underestimate any of them. Severus would have to bide his time and wait for one of them to make a mistake. At least they hadn't found Fawkes. If they harmed the phoenix, he'd make them pay. When he was done with them, they wouldn't wake up until the millennium, if then.

He sighed inwardly. His life certainly had changed. After years of trying to protect the Potter brat, now he was trying to protect a bird. It was definitely an improvement.



The Cargo Hold



“WHAT WAS THAT?” SAID DOLOHOV.

“Something crowed,” said Yaxley.

Severus’s heart sank. Fawkes had awakened. If only he’d had an opportunity to slip the bird a sleeping potion, or cast a silencing spell on him. Or better yet, tell him to get lost and chase him out a porthole.

“It’s probably Mavis, the captain’s parrot,” Seabiscuit said, smiling nervously.

“That was no parrot! Keep an eye on those guys,” Dolohov said as he drew his wand and left the mess.

Severus started to get up, but Rowle stepped in front of him and pointed his wand. “Going somewhere?” he asked.

“I thought I’d get more tea,” Severus said as he slowly stood up. Maybe if he could tackle Rowle and keep Rowle’s body between himself and Yaxley, then Kat and Biscuit would have a chance to...

Yaxley wasn’t going to fall for that. He lunged toward Severus. “Sit down!” he ordered. “Nobody’s going anywhere until Dolohov gets back.”

Severus sat down. Getting himself stunned or killed wasn’t going to help anyone. He would have to contain his fury and wait for a better opportunity.



Fawkes stretched his wings and pushed the curtain aside to let the sun stream in. He crowed again and looked out the porthole. Seabirds wheeled over the island and a few hardy flowers bloomed among the rocks. It was a beautiful day. Perhaps he’d go out for a flight after breakfast.

When he heard the door open behind him, he assumed it was Severus.



Then he heard someone shout “*Stupefy!*” and everything went black.



Rowle and Yaxley were still standing guard over Severus and the sailors when Dolohov came back carrying the limp phoenix. He flopped it onto the table and sneered at Severus. “Thought you’d keep this for yourself, did you?”

“He’s my bird, and I see no reason to share,” Severus snarled. Fawkes had better not be injured. He hated the Cruciatus curse, but if they harmed Fawkes Severus would give them all a few rounds of Crucio before he left them for the Aurors.

“I can’t believe it! A phoenix! He’s worth a fortune!” Dolohov laughed. “I’m impressed. You managed to steal Dumbledore’s phoenix. But you shouldn’t have tried to hide him from me. That wasn’t smart.” He turned to Yaxley and Rowle. “Take ‘Mr Slade’ and lock him in the cargo hold until I decide what to do with him.”

Dolohov looked down at the unconscious phoenix and cast a strong sleeping spell on him. “I know a certain potions dealer who will be very happy to see you, birdie. Very happy indeed!”



Severus stood in the cargo hold and listened to them resetting the wards. He was fuming. Why hadn’t he bothered to spell any magic pockets into his new clothes? The few items that might have been useful were in the pockets of his old jacket in his locker. He was an idiot!

He started tearing through the crates that Shunpike had searched.



The herbs were all medicinal herbs. Nothing dangerous. Nothing explosive. Nothing that would help. He slammed the crates shut and opened the shipment of wand-wood. He tried out a few of the sticks, but they were useless without cores. Nothing happened.

He'd have to try wandless magic. He'd spent a lot of time practicing and he had mastered wandless magic as well as anyone could, but ward-breaking required good focus, and it was impossible to focus magic properly without a wand.

"Excuse me," said the lady from Melbourne. "My name is Lydia and this is my husband, Jack."

Severus had forgotten about the two passengers. "Don't bother me!" he snapped. "Go sit down and stay out of the way!" The last thing he needed right now was a couple of chatty passengers. No, that was wrong. The last thing would have been Potter and Longbottom, or maybe some Weasleys. The passengers were the next-to-last thing.

Lydia looked at Jack and rolled her eyes. Then she and Jack went and sat down in a corner.

Severus concentrated, trying to focus wandless magic on the wards. Soon he felt the ship vibrate as the magic engines started up, and then he felt the ship dive. Wherever they were going, it couldn't be good.



Despite his best efforts, Severus hadn't made much progress by the time he felt the ship surface and come to a halt. Dolohov's wards were tough. He was getting a headache, but he kept trying. It was all that he could think of to do.



"I should be able to help, now that we've surfaced again," Lydia said, breaking his concentration.

"And just how do you propose to do that?" he asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"We'll show you," said Jack. He walked over and opened the porthole. "There you go, dear."

With a soft pop, Lydia turned into a rather large, iridescent blue dragonfly and flitted out through the porthole. She was an animagus! It was all that Severus could do to keep from looking astonished.

"That's my gal!" Jack said proudly.

Severus dashed to the porthole and looked out. "Call her back!" he said. "Those men are desperate killers. She won't stand a chance against them."

"Don't worry," Jack said, smiling. "I'm sure she'll manage. She's really quite resourceful."

They were barking mad, both of them; Severus was sure of it. He went back to the wards, working frantically. As if he didn't have enough to worry about with Fawkes and the crew, now he had to try to keep that fool Lydia from getting herself killed. Things were going from bad to worse.



Severus thought he could finally feel the wards starting to loosen when he heard footsteps outside. He felt the wards go down and Rowle flung the door open, pointing his wand. "Get back!" he shouted.

Severus stepped back while Captain Clark and his crew filed in under the watchful eyes of the Death Eaters. Then Rowle slammed the door and Dolohov reset the wards. Now Severus would have to start over again.



"What's going on?" he asked Clark.

"We're anchored off a rocky coast in the north of Scotland," the captain said. "Apparently there's some trader here who specializes in illegal potion ingredients and exotic poisons and stuff like that. Dolohov says he came here a couple of times to get stuff for the Dark Lord."

Severus knew all too well what kind of 'stuff' it probably was. He used to wonder where the Dark Lord got some of those things. He almost shuddered.

"They're all going to go ashore, except for that young guy. They're leaving him on guard duty. They want to sell Fawkes."

That was more or less what Severus had expected to hear, and it did not improve his mood. "If any of you have any ideas, now is the time to say so," he told them.

Nobody answered, so he returned to attacking the wards.



Time passed slowly as they watched Severus work. It seemed hopeless, but he wasn't going to give up. Then they heard something scrape softly against the hull.

"Oh look!" Jack cried, pointing at the porthole. A wand was slowly sinking into view, dangling at the end of a string.

Severus reached out and grabbed it. It was Shunpike's. It didn't feel right in his hand, but it was a lot better than nothing. He pointed it at the door and the wards came down. A quick Alohomora took care of the lock.

They stepped out to find a smiling Lydia waiting for them beside a nervous-looking Stan. "Stanley and I had a nice talk, and he has agreed to



help us," she told them. "We didn't know how to break the wards, so we lowered his wand to you. The rest of them have all apparated to shore."

A nice talk? Severus wondered what had really happened. He stifled an urge to thank her and headed for the deck, followed by the others. "Stay with the ship and go for help," he told them all. "I'm going to get Fawkes." With that, he dove over the rail and started to fly.

"Wow!" Kat said as he watched Severus fly across the waves. "That is so cool! I didn't know it was possible to do that."

"Get my broom!" Captain Clark bellowed. "If Slade thinks I'm gonna let him go out there alone, he'd better think again. I'm gonna go kick those hijackers' mangy butts all the way back to wherever they came from!" He had no idea how he was going to do that without a wand but he was way too angry to care.

Biscuit quickly fetched three brooms. "These are all we've got," he said.

"We only need one," Clark told him. "You guys are staying here."

"Oh no we're not," Kat said, and everyone nodded, even Stan.





Showdown



RADER JONES AND HIS WIFE SUSIE WERE AN

attractive young couple who were dressed as if they were about to set out on safari. They were thrilled to see the unconscious bird. They'd never dreamed they'd have an opportunity to buy a phoenix. He would be reborn repeatedly, no matter what they did to him, so they could sell parts of him over and over and over again!

Jones shook Dolohov's hand firmly. "It's good to see you again! I was so sorry to hear about the loss of the Dark Lord. Tragic, it was." He shook his head sadly. The Dark Lord had been one of his best customers. "I was saving some nice human pineal glands for him. The pineal is the seat of the soul, they say."

He beckoned to his wife. "Bring whiskey for our guests, dear."

After Susie had poured each of them a generous glass of firewhiskey, Jones lead them out to a large barn behind the house where he kept a variety of cages and tanks. There was a large iron cauldron in one corner, and flies were circling around a heavy wooden table and very bloody chopping block.

"Lock your phoenix in that empty cage over there and take a look at these lovely specimens." He pointed to a pair of wyverns in a large cage. "Magnificent, aren't they? I've been selling their teeth and scales, and their brains will bring a pretty penny when I'm done with them. Watch out for their tails — they have poisonous stingers."

Next he showed them a panda cub. Its ears had been cut off and sold for potion ingredients. There were also a couple of sad-looking orangutans and a cage full of Cornish pixies. Shelves by the back door held pre-



served specimens. There were bottles of pickled pygmy puffs, assorted eyeballs, a few baby skrewts, and some nasty-looking dried insects. Human hands floated in a large jar there. When Dolohov thought he saw one of them twitch, he downed the rest of his whiskey in one gulp. Susie promptly refilled his glass. It was always so much easier to negotiate a favorable price when the guests were sloshed.



Severus crept toward the barn. If these fools had any wards they'd taken them down to admit the Death Eaters. He'd seen five people go into the barn: the three Death Eaters, a man who was probably the potions dealer, and a woman who was probably his wife or girlfriend.

He reached the barn and pressed himself against the wall. There was an open window beside the front door and he peered in cautiously. The Death Eaters were near the back door, chatting with the dealer and the woman. Fawkes was lying unconscious in a cage. If he was going to take on five people with Stan Shunpike's wand, Severus knew he would have to be very careful.



Captain Clark rode his broom across the waves. He was flanked by Biscuit and Stan on one broom, and Kat and Jack on the other. A big blue dragonfly perched on Jack's shoulder. They could have apparated to the shore, Clark realized. The roar of the breakers would have drowned out the sound of their arrival.

They landed as close to the house as they dared. It was a quaint little



cottage sitting alone on a moor. The only other building in sight was a large barn in the distance behind the cottage.

"All of you stay put while I take a look around," Clark told them sternly, but of course as soon as he was out of sight they took the opportunity to creep up to the cottage and peek through a window. They didn't see anyone inside, so they decided to do some investigating of their own. Kat slid the window open and climbed in. The others followed cautiously, except for Lydia, who flew off behind the house.

The place was definitely creepy, despite its cheery flowered curtains and pink couch. There was a collection of strange-looking skulls on the mantelpiece and a stuffed gorilla stood by the front door. The mounted heads of a hippogriff, a dolphin and a giraffe stared blankly from the opposite wall. All the animals had fierce expressions frozen on their faces, even the dolphin. "These folks are definitely into some weird stuff," Kat muttered.

They were snooping through the books on the bookshelves when they heard a grunt behind them. The stuffed gorilla had started to move and was shambling forward slowly, its arms outstretched toward them.



Very carefully, Severus pointed Stan's wand through the barn window and cast a nonverbal Alohomora. Despite his use of an unfamiliar wand, the spell popped every lock in the place. No one noticed except the Cornish pixies, who immediately started trying to get their cage door open. The dealer and the Death Eaters were busy drinking and talking, and Susie was refreshing everyone's drink again.





Good, thought Severus. Now all he'd have to do is wake the phoenix and create a diversion while the bird escaped. He cast a silent Finite Incantatem. Everyone noticed that right away because it ended the dealer's Glamour. Suddenly he and Susie were revealed as they really were: a drab, shifty-looking couple dressed in old, blood-stained work clothes. The Death Eaters stared in surprise.

It also ended the sleeping spell and Fawkes' eyes popped open.



If Severus had seen Fawkes in action against the basilisk, he would have known that escape would be the last thing on the bird's mind, but all he'd been told was that the bird had 'helped Potter' and brought him the Sorting Hat. He didn't know what Fawkes had done in the battle at the Ministry, either. Albus never told anyone anything more than he had to, and it goes without saying that the Dark Lord had never mentioned the matter.

Fawkes shrieked and exploded out of the cage. In all the millennia, no one had ever dared to attack him like that! Baboon-Face would pay for this outrage!

Dolohov spun around and saw Fawkes flying straight at his face with claws extended. He started to raise his wand, but then thought better of it and ducked instead. That probably saved his life because Fawkes barely missed his head. The phoenix was moving too fast to turn and shot out through the open back door.

Severus leaned in through the window and snarled "*Stupefy!*" as he cast a stunner at Dolohov. The red flash streaked through the barn, but with Stan's wand the spell wasn't quite strong enough and Dolohov man-



aged to deflect it with a shield charm.

Rowle took cover behind a stack of crates and cast *Crucio* at Severus, but he was tipsy from the firewhiskey and nearly hit Dolohov instead. While Dolohov was swearing at Rowle, Severus took a quick look around for Yaxley. He couldn't spot the third Death Eater anywhere, but he saw the dealer and the woman standing beside an empty cage, swatting frantically at a swarm of pixies.

Dolohov had been relatively restrained in his drinking and unfortunately he was much more sober than Rowle was. He pointed his wand and was about to shout "*Petrificus...*" but Severus cast again. This time his spell hit the shield so hard that it knocked the words out of Dolohov's mouth and forced him backward. Then Severus cast at the crates and sent them crashing down on Rowle.

In a drunken rage, Rowle cast a ferocious Killing Curse that was accurate enough to make Severus duck down from the window and drop down flat on the ground. The green flash exploded through the window and showered Severus with glass shards and wood fragments.



As soon as he'd seen Severus, Yaxley had slipped behind the orangutan cage. There was no way he was going to duel Severus Snape! No, he had a much better plan. He would sneak around the outside of the barn and get behind Snape. With luck he'd have a clear shot at the man's back. This was going to be fun!

While the others were distracted he cast a charm to hide any noise and then he opened a nearby window and slipped out unnoticed. He



grinned drunkenly as he tiptoed through the grass along the edge of the barn, anticipating his victory.



"Open that door!" Kat shouted, pointing at a heavy wooden door that probably lead to a cellar. It creaked ominously as Jack pulled it open, and a nauseating smell poured out. Stan gagged.

Kat pulled down a curtain and stepped in front of the lumbering gorilla, waving the curtain like a bullfighter's cape. "Come on, King Kong, come to Papa," he crooned as he backed toward the open door. At the last moment he threw the curtain over the gorilla's head and dodged to the side. Working together, they pushed the gorilla down the stairs, slammed the door, and barricaded it with the pink couch.

"Crikey!" Jack said as they listened to the gorilla bumping around in the cellar.

Biscuit piled a coffee table on top of the couch. "Let's get out of here before the captain finds out."

"Yeah," Kat agreed. "I don't think he'd be too happy that we stirred up a zombie gorilla."

Stan was already on his way out the door.



Lydia hovered near the panda's cage. She could see the entire interior of the barn with her huge multifaceted eyes. Severus had dropped below the window and appeared to be safe for the moment. Then she noticed a pixie trying to let the wyverns out of their cage. She darted over





and clacked her mandibles at it. It squeaked and fled. *Ah ha!* she thought, *they're frightened of me.*

The rest the pixies were still taking their revenge on Jones and Susie. They bit them, pulled their hair, and poked at them with sticks. *They're such nasty little things!* Lydia thought happily. Buzzing and clacking, she darted over to the pixies and separated a half-dozen of them from the rest of the group. Then she started to herd them toward Dolohov.



Dolohov swore. Everything was going wrong. He'd lost the phoenix and it was all Snape's fault. He should have killed that treacherous, back-stabbing son of a Muggle when he had the chance. And where was Yaxley, anyway? That useless idiot had picked a fine time to disappear.

"Keep Snape pinned down!" he shouted to Rowle. He would slip out the back door and surprise Snape with a sneak attack. Snape would be caught between him and Rowle, and he would have no trouble stunning the traitor. Then they could go after the phoenix, and finish Snape off afterward at their leisure. That would be entertaining. Maybe they could even sell his pineal gland to Jones after they were done with him. Yes, he would enjoy that.



The Hands of Doom



S FAWKES FLEW BACK TO THE BARN HE SAW

Severus drop to the ground just ahead of a green flash. His wizard was trying to help! That was so sweet of him! But Baboon-Face and his lackeys might hurt his wizard. He'd better get to work.

Fawkes wheeled and dove through the front door. "The phoenix!" Jones shouted, forgetting about the attacking pixies. "Stun him! *Stupefy!*"

Fawkes rolled and dodged the spell easily. Baboon-Face had been his intended target, but this idiot was asking for it. Fawkes grabbed Jones by his wand-arm and the man cried in pain as the claws sank in and he was ripped from the ground.

"*Stupefy!*" Susie yelled as Fawkes sped out the back door carrying her husband, but her spell missed. She started to run after them but a pair of pixies tripped her with a length of wire they'd found, and she fell flat on her face on the floor.



Severus was pleased. He'd accomplished his objective and freed the phoenix. Now it was time to get out of there. He started to get up off the ground, but a series of spells and curses flashed out through the wrecked window and he dropped back down. It was *not* a good time to get up. Then he saw Fawkes fly back into the barn. He groaned. What was that stupid bird thinking, anyway? Didn't he know when to quit?

Cursing and swearing to himself, Severus crawled out from under the window and crept around the corner of the barn. Maybe if he could get



to the back door, he could stun Dolohov and Rowle before they realized he was there. Then he'd have to hunt down Yaxley. Where was that dun-derhead, anyway?



Yaxley reached the front of the barn just in time to see Snape disappearing around the corner. "That won't help you," he sang softly, "I'm gonna get ya!" He dashed past the front door, ducked under the shattered window, and looked around the corner. Sure enough, there was Snape with his back turned, sneaking along the edge of the barn. It was almost too good to be true. He could nail the guy with his own curse! "*Sectumsemptra!*" he cried.

Unfortunately for Yaxley, that was the moment when Dolohov happened to come around the opposite corner of the barn. Severus spotted Dolohov, and as he dropped into a crouch and started to raise his wand, Yaxley's curse passed over his head and hit Dolohov, slicing into Dolohov's arm. Dolohov cursed obscenely, grabbed his wound, and vanished back behind the barn.

"Oops!" said Yaxley. Now he was in for it. Dolohov would kill him for sure.

Severus whirled around to cast at Yaxley, but the Death Eater had dashed back around to the front of the barn where, to his surprise, he came face to face with Captain Clark and the bunch from the boat. Before he could raise his wand, Clark clobbered him with a broom.



Dolohov ran back into the barn. His arm was bleeding and it felt like it



was on fire. He'd kill that lazy lummoxy Yaxley just as soon as he was finished with Snape! But first he had to tend to his arm. Where was Rowle? He turned to look for the man when suddenly a pixie poked him in the eye with a stick.

Dolohov jerked sideways and convulsed in pain. Clutching his eye, he staggered into the shelves beside the back door. They wobbled precariously and the jar of hands hit the floor and shattered. Dolohov slipped in the liquid and fell.



Fawkes flew up over the barn carrying Jones, who was swearing and kicking frantically. He gripped the dealer's arm tightly so the man couldn't use his wand. He had to get back into the barn. It was Baboon-Face that he really wanted. Baboon-Face was the mastermind and he had to be stopped. But first Fawkes had to get rid of his struggling burden. What should he do with the idiot? Maybe he should just drop him. Then he spotted his friends from the boat fighting with someone in front of the barn.



The severed hands scattered across the floor when the jar shattered. They began to twitch, and then one by one they rose up on all five fingers, as if they were about to play the piano. They moved slowly at first, walking on their fingertips, and soon they were hopping and scuttling around like pink and brown spiders. One scooted over to Dolohov who was lying on the floor, holding his bleeding arm and trying to wipe his eye. It extended its index finger to touch his leg. Dolohov didn't notice. Then



the hand took hold of his pant leg and started to climb.



Yaxley had put up quite a fight, but Clark and the gang managed to subdue him and stun him with his own wand. Clark was putting the finishing touches on an Incarcerous spell when Susie came running out the front door with the pixies and the dragonfly in hot pursuit.

"Get her wand!" Clark yelled. Biscuit promptly tackled her but she kicked him in the head and would have got loose if Stan and Jack hadn't piled on, too. She threw Jack off and gave Stan a nasty head-butt. Kat pounced, but she rolled out of the way and sprang to her feet, ready to duel with Clark. If there had been a Wizard Wrestling Federation she could have been a star.

Fawkes, meanwhile, had found an excellent way to get rid of Jones: he swooped down and dumped the dealer on top of Susie.



Rowle stuck his head out the shattered window to look for Snape. The half-blood was nowhere to be seen. Then his alcohol-fogged brain realized that there was some sort of ruckus going on out there. It was all those gits from the boat, fighting with Jones and his wife. Well, he'd put a stop to that. And so what if he hit Jones and the woman, too? Then they could rob the place and be on their way. Why bother to sell anything when they could just take the money?





Severus stepped through the back door of the barn with a sneer on his face and Stan's wand in his hand. Even without his billowing black robes he was a fearsome sight, not that anybody noticed. Dolohov was lying on the floor moaning, and Rowle was leaning out the window.

Seeing that Dolohov was out of action for the moment, Severus hit Rowle squarely in the bum with a stinging hex, followed immediately by a full-body bind. Rowle jumped and yelped, and then he stiffened and fell out the window like a lead brick.

Good, Severus thought. That's one down. Now for Dolohov...



Dolohov felt something moving on his chest and something else on his leg. At first he thought it was his imagination, but then he looked down. His vision was blurry, but there were... hands!... severed hands, crawling on his body! He screamed and scrambled to his feet, thrashing at the hands, but they hung on and continued to climb.

"Help me!" he screamed. "Get 'em off me!"

One of them reached his throat and started to squeeze.



A Show of Hands



FAWKES FLEW BACK INTO THE BARN. HE WAS

going to get Baboon-Face! But then he saw Severus staring at the man. The Death Eater was dancing around and trying to fight off a bunch of... hand-creatures?

How delightful! How imaginative! Fawkes had planned to take revenge himself, but his Severus had already taken care of it for him. The other phoenixes did not keep wizards, Fawkes knew, but he couldn't imagine why. Wizards could be so entertaining and their antics were so much fun. It was so thoughtful of Severus to have arranged this show for him. Cackling happily, he landed in the rafters and settled down to watch.



Severus stared in amazement for a few moments. Dolohov's face was turning bright red as he struggled with the hands that were gripping his throat. Perhaps he ought to do something about it, he supposed, even though Dolohov certainly didn't deserve any help.

"Hold still, you idiot!" Severus hissed as he fired a stinging hex at one of the hands. It missed as Dolohov twisted and thrashed. Well, that was easily remedied. "*Petrificus Totalus!*" Dolohov froze, and then one by one, Severus's spells forced each hand to lose its grip and fall to the floor.

Some of the hands tried to scamper away, but Severus worked quickly and levitated each of them into the big iron cauldron. Then he dropped the heavy lid on it and secured it with a locking charm. He could hear the hands scrambling and scratching inside, like crabs in a bucket. It made his skin crawl.

Then he felt something on his leg. To his horror, a long-fingered, fem-



inine-looking hand had just crossed the top of his boot and was starting up his pant leg. He'd missed one! He pointed his wand at it, but it scurried behind his knee where he couldn't hex it, and then it started climbing up the back of his leg. It tickled! He twisted around trying to find some way to cast at it, and it pinched his bum! He swore. The nerve of the thing!

Fawkes squawked with glee! This was almost as much fun than the time that Lockhart had tried to turn Peeves into a grapefruit!

Severus sat down as hard as he could, smashing the hand against a crate. He could feel it squirming weakly beneath him. Then he sprang to his feet, leaving the thing exposed. As it staggered up onto its fingertips he cried "*Levimanus!* Now I've got you!"

The hand waggled its middle finger at Severus as he floated it up into the air. He sneered back at it, and when he dumped it into the cauldron with the rest of the hands, he placed a double locking charm on the lid.



Severus quickly searched Dolohov and recovered all of their wands. I felt wonderful to have his own wand in his hand again! Then he rushed to the front door and looked out.

He was greeted by an amazing sight: Yaxley, Rowle, the dealer, and the woman lay stunned and bound on the ground, and everyone else was running around trying to shoo away pixies. The dragonfly was helping them.

"Go back to Cornwall, ya nasty little devils!" Biscuit snarled as he swung his broom at a clutch of them. They cheeped and flitted away unharmed.

"I thought I told you people to go for help," Severus shouted at them. Although perhaps it was just as well that they hadn't. He certainly didn't





want to have to explain himself to a bunch of Aurors.

"And miss all the fun?" Clark called back, laughing. "Not a chance!"

Severus scowled and resisted the urge to hex him.



It was after Severus had levitated Dolohov out of the barn and placed him with the others that they saw the gorilla. It had finally escaped from the cellar and it was lumbering slowly toward the barn. The remains of a flowered curtain hung from its shoulders like a tattered poncho.

"What... is *that*?" asked Captain Clark.

Well, it, um, looks sort of like a zombie gorilla," Biscuit said, trying to sound innocent.

"Well, now I've seen everything," the captain said as he drew his wand.



Fawkes watched curiously from the barn roof as Severus and Clark cast stunners at the gorilla. Judging from the intensity of the red flashes, they were powerful spells, but they had no effect at all. What was this thing? Some sort of bizarre Inferius? Fawkes had never seen anything quite like it. The gorilla continued to move mindlessly forward, and his friends started to back up.

Fawkes decided to intervene before anyone got hurt. He swooped off the roof and struck at the gorilla's eyes. His claws clicked against something hard and he realized that the eyes were glass. Oops! Maybe this wasn't going to work as well as it had with the basilisk. The beast reached for him and he flew off.



Then Severus tried a different approach: "*Finite Incantatem!*" The gorilla staggered and then slowly came to a stop, like a wind-up toy that had run down. Severus had broken the spell that was controlling it.

Fawkes circled the gorilla and cawed at Severus. That was a clever move. He and Severus made a good team! He returned to the barn roof and crowed mightily.

"That poor animal," Lydia said, staring at the motionless gorilla. She had returned to her human form. "No creature should end up like that."

"No worries, dear," Jack said as he put his arm around her. "I'm sure its soul is long gone. That thing is just an empty husk. Those two yobbos must have killed the poor thing and enchanted its corpse."

"That's horrible," Lydia said sadly. "I'm so glad we could put an end to their pointless cruelty."



Seabiscuit apparated to the ship and brought back a batch of corned beef sandwiches, a pot of coffee, some Pepperup potion, and some sweets for Fawkes. He also brought Kat his favorite pirate hat. Now that the excitement was over, they realized that they were all exhausted. No one except Fawkes had slept since the hijacking had started, and there was still a lot to do.

First, there was healing to be done. Lydia was unscathed, but Stan had a broken nose, Biscuit had a black eye, and there were lots of nasty cuts, scratches, bruises and pixie bites on almost everyone, including the stunned prisoners. Dolohov's eye and arm were in bad shape, but Severus and Clark did what they could, and he would recover.



Next, they had to decide what to do with their prisoners. "I'd like to oblivate them, if you don't mind, Captain," Severus said to Clark. "It would be simpler if they didn't remember us." Of course, what he really meant was that it would be simpler if they didn't remember *him*. If they told everyone that they'd seen Severus Snape, it would complicate his life immensely. It was so much simpler being Solomon Slade. He still had to bear all the pain of his past, all the guilt, remorse and sorrow, but at least he didn't have everyone in wizarding Britain hounding him about it.

The captain knew exactly what he meant. "Go right ahead," he said. It would simplify things for him, too. There would be no questions to answer, and no paperwork to do. "It's fine with me if they can't remember anything that happened after they got to Dublin."

So Severus cast a strong sleeping spell on each of them and set to work modifying their memories. He'd had plenty of practice with memory modification during his years as a spy and he was quite skillful at it.

He started with Rowle. He opened the big Death Eater's eyes and looked into his sleeping mind. It was a simple mind, mostly empty except for thoughts of violence, and he had no trouble finding the memories and removing them.

Yaxley's mind was more... unusual. He was having a colorful dream about several Veelas and a very large puffskein. Severus was tempted to stay and watch for a few minutes but he knew he had to go after the memories instead.

Jones' mind was a nasty place. It filled with greed and little else, and Severus found out that his real name was actually Melrose Hogg. No wonder he'd changed it to Jones.



Susie was the real brain behind their partnership; her mind was filled with all sorts of complex schemes. She was the one who'd created the spell that had animated the dead gorilla.

Dolohov's mind was just plain scary. Memories of repulsive things that he'd done and enjoyed lurked everywhere. His memories of the hijacking were stubborn and hard to remove, but Severus pried them loose. He was careful to leave behind enough memory of the hands to give the Death Eater some very vivid nightmares, however.



They locked the sleeping prisoners in some of the unoccupied animal cages while Severus made a quick search for useful brewing equipment and potion ingredients. He found some interesting books in the cottage, too. The things he missed most about Hogwarts were the library and his potions lab.

Biscuit had just returned from feeding and watering the animals. Thoughtfully, he'd left bowls of Acme Monkey Chow and water for the prisoners, too, in case they were hungry and thirsty when they woke up. "I'd watch out for the cellar," he warned. "There's something down there that smells really rotten."

Severus opened the door a crack, caught a wiff of it, and quickly shut the door again. "Burmese stinkhorn fungus," he said. "They must be growing it down there. Vile stuff."

"What's going to happen to the animals?" Biscuit asked. "We can't just turn 'em loose in Scotland."

"The Ministry can take care of them," Severus told him. "I suggest we call the Aurors and leave before they get here. They'll seize the illegal



substances, arrest the prisoners, and return all the creatures to wherever they came from.”

“What do you suppose they’ll do with those horrible hands?” Lydia asked.

“They’ll probably end up in the Department of Mysteries, along with the gorilla. They like that sort of thing there,” Severus said.

“Well, let’s call the Aurors and get out of here then,” said Clark. “Has anyone seen a floo around here?”

“I know an easier way,” Severus said. He stepped outside, pointed his wand into the air, and shouted “*Morsmordre!*” Black smoke and green sparks shot into the sky, and the Dark Mark bloomed over the site.

“That will bring them quickly enough.”

“Cool!” said Kat. “Will you teach me how to do that?”

“Absolutely not,” said Severus.



Severus stood on the deck watching the moon rise while the others headed below. Fawkes had flown back earlier and was probably sound asleep on his perch.

“Come on,” Biscuit called, “we’re gonna celebrate!”

“In a moment,” Severus replied.

He felt the deck vibrate under his feet as the captain started the magic engines and the ship turned out into the Atlantic. Laughter floated up from the passengers’ lounge below decks. It felt good to be alive.





Digression



AND DON'T FORGET, YOU TWO, IF YOU PUT

so much as one toe outside of the grounds, or put your finger on a wand, you'll be back in Azkaban before you know it," the Auror said sternly.

As if they could forget. The house-arrest spell would zip them back automatically. Lucius bit back a sharp reply and simply nodded. Draco turned and looked toward the manor. "Can we go now?" he asked.

The Auror snorted and disappeared with a loud crack. The noise startled the white peacocks, and Narcissa looked out the window. "They're here!" she cried to the House-Elves. "Fix them some food!" Then she ran out the door and down the long driveway to embrace them.

She nearly smothered Draco. "I'm okay, mom, honest," he insisted, hugging her back. "Take it easy! You'll crush me to death on my first day home."

Then she threw her arms around her husband. "Wait, dear," he said, drawing back a bit. "I'm sure we smell terrible."

"Not as bad as last time," she laughed. "They must have let you bathe before you left."

"Actually, things are a bit better there now," he told her. "It's warmer, and they give us clean clothes and let us take showers twice a week."

"I think I like the stubble," she said, kissing him. "It makes you look wild and savage."

"Well, I don't feel wild and savage," he said, smiling tiredly. "Let's go inside, shall we?"



"I'm not sure what we're going to do," Minerva said. "It looks like very few of the Slytherins will be returning. Their parents are a bit upset that their children were 'driven out' before the battle, and now they say that everyone believes that their children were all Death Eaters, each and every one of them, even the first years."

The Heads of Houses were gathered in Minerva's office for a staff meeting.

"I can't imagine how *that* could have happened," a sarcastic voice said from across the room. It was the portrait of Phineas Black.

Filius Flitwick frowned. "They're all going to drop out? That won't bode well for their futures."

"Being branded as Death Eaters has ruined their futures anyway," Phineas said, "so I really don't see what difference it will make."

Minerva ignored Phineas and continued. "The ones who can afford it say they are going to hire tutors or send their children to other schools abroad. Some are going to try home schooling. And the parents of some of the new students are threatening to sue if their children are sorted into Slytherin. You wouldn't believe some of the Howlers I've received!"

"Slytherin house will be almost empty, then," Horace Slughorn said quietly. He looked despondent.

"Which brings me to another problem," Minerva said. "The Sorting Hat was badly damaged by Voldemort during the battle, and I'm afraid that my repair spells haven't been able to fix it. It seems happy enough, but its words are all gibberish now. The new students will be arriving next month, and I'm not sure it will be able to sort them."

The Hat stirred on its shelf. "Huwawah!" it said happily.

"Hmmm," said Filius. "Maybe one of us should put it on and see what happens."



"Good idea," Pomona Sprout said. She put the Hat on her head.

"Frazzengavit!" it cried.

"Now take it off and put it back on again," Filius told her. "If it says the same thing again, then we'll know that 'Frazzengavit' means 'Hufflepuff'."

Pomona did as he asked. The Hat said, "Wheechee!"

Filius sighed. "Yes, it seems that we do have a problem."



"I'm not so sure about becoming an Auror," Harry said, staring into his butterbeer.

"Don't worry, mate," Ron said. "They're glad to have us; we're war heroes."

"That's what worries me. We aren't really qualified to be Aurors. We defeated Voldemort because of my mom's protection, and because of that stuff about the Elder Wand. But that's not going to work against ordinary blokes. And most of the stuff that we learned in Defense was pointless. Lupin and Snape were the only ones who taught us anything useful. As Aurors, we'll be going up against a lot of people who know more than us and have more experience."

"They're going to be training us. It will work out. You'll see." Ron signaled the waitress to bring more crisps.

"Yeah, maybe, but we didn't even finish school. And a lot of the time, we weren't really paying attention. Hermione won't be there to help us now. We depended on her a lot."

"Do you want me to try to talk her into becoming an Auror, too?"

"No," Harry laughed, "I don't think she'd go for that. Maybe we should just hit the books, you know, and try to fill in the gaps. We missed a lot of stuff."





"That's because we were busy worrying about Voldemort."

"True, but that's not going to make any difference if we have to face down some murderous lunatics."

"I hope you're not suggesting a KwikSpell course," Ron said. He was starting to realize that Harry might be right.

Harry laughed again. "No, but I think we'd better get to work. I wonder if Hermione would tutor us?"



An interspecies romance was completely out of the question. Mavis, the captain's parrot, was a beautiful bird, but a phoenix mates only once, at the end of its life, which wasn't going to be any time soon. If they went around laying eggs all the time, the world would be so full of phoenixes by now that there would be no room for left anything else. Besides, she was a parrot and he was a phoenix. It would be inappropriate. Fawkes explained that to her, and told her they could only be friends.

To cheer her up, he told her how Queen Semiramis had built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon just for him (or so he believed; it never occurred to him that the Queen might have had some additional motives). She had been a powerful witch, and it was a shame that jealous people had sullied her reputation with lies and attributed her accomplishments to others. Fawkes missed her. She had been a fine old gal.

Mavis smiled inwardly (outwardly, parrots always look like they're smiling). The phoenix was so vain, thinking that she had a crush on him. Well, maybe she did, just a little bit, but she knew that it could never work out. He was way too old for her.



She told him how she'd been kidnapped by bird smugglers when she was just a fledgling. She'd managed to escape in Amsterdam while they were trying to sell her, but it was winter and she wouldn't have lasted long if she hadn't flown over a canal where Captain Clark spotted her. He caught her with a spell and brought her into the boat where it was warm. He tried to return her to the Amazon, but she refused to leave. She had become fond of him, and she liked life on the boat. Maybe some day she would go home to find a mate, but right now she was enjoying the adventure. Especially now that she had Fawkes to tell her tall tales. He was such a silly old bird, and so handsome, too. They chattered together for hours.



"I've been dreaming about a long, hot bath ever since... well, ever since —" Draco didn't want to think about the recent past. He let it drop.

"Take as long as you want, son," Lucius told him. "I'll bathe in one of the guest rooms."

He and Narcissa moved to the couch in front of the fire to let the House-Elves clear the table. "We'll bathe, dear," she whispered.

"You're going to scrub my back, are you?" Lucius grinned. "It's good to be home. You and Draco are all that I have in the world. Well, aside from my wealth and the manor, that is."

"Our wealth, darling, *our* wealth. And I'm not going to let them take it away from us." She paused for a moment. "The chances are very good that you and Draco will be pardoned. Potter told everyone how I'd helped him, and I've been telling everyone how we'd been forced to obey the Dark Lord. How if any one of us had disobeyed, another one of us would



have been killed horribly right before our eyes. I gave Rita Skeeter an interview, and I told her how terrible it was, never knowing what was to become of us. It appeared in *The Prophet* last weekend. It was a true Skeeter masterpiece, very heart-rending. I've received quite a few sympathy notes since it came out."

"Did it cost much?" he asked.

"No, not really. I gave her a small down payment, and then the rest after the article appeared."

"My dear, you are a true Slytherin. That's one of the many reasons why I love you." He leaned over and kissed her.

Narcissa smiled and took his hand. "I have more good news for you. I got a letter from Severus two days ago. He survived! He's alive and well, but he wants everyone to think that he's dead. Except for us, of course. He says he hopes that we'll forgive him for deceiving us, but he thought it would be best for everyone if the Dark Lord was destroyed."

"That's wonderful! Of course we forgive him! He did the right thing. The Dark Lord had gone insane. He'd turned into a monster and he would have killed us all, one by one, whether we were loyal or not. He would have killed Draco, and he nearly killed Severus."

"Severus didn't say where he was. A seagull brought the letter. Can you imagine that? It gobbled up at least six owl treats while I wrote a quick reply, and then it left."

"I'm relieved about Severus. I should have gone back for him," Lucius said. "I feel guilty about that, but I was so worried about Draco at the time that I didn't even think of it until later. Then Potter said he was dead."

"Well, he's not, and we're the only ones who know."



The AURORS ARRIVE



HE CELEBRATION WAS IN FULL SWING WHEN

Captain Clark came into the passengers' lounge. Seabiscuit had brought out the good scotch and brandy, and Severus and Lydia were the only ones showing any restraint. Severus was in the habit of being cautious with alcohol due to his many years as a spy, and Lydia was just being sensible.

"I told Knight Lines that we'd been enchanted by sirens, but we managed to escape," Clark announced. "I told them we'll need a few days off to recover. They can have Boat Four cover for us."

The ship communicated with Knight Lines via an enchanted scroll. When the captain wrote on it, his words would appear on a sister scroll in their office, and then their reply would appear on his.

"I want you people to get some sleep," he told them. "I don't want to deal with a bunch of hangovers tomorrow."

"Aye, Cap'n! Aargh!" Biscuit said, raising his glass. He was back to playing pirate again.

Realizing that it was hopeless, Clark took Severus aside. "Can you help me set some wards on the ship? I don't think anyone is going to be up to standing watch tonight. We're all exhausted, and on top of that, the rest of them are half-drunk now, too. I've anchored us off the Orkney Islands, and we should be safe enough here. And by the way, you've been promoted. You're officially our Security Officer now. I told Knight Lines we couldn't have escaped from the sirens without you." He winked.

For a moment, 'Slade' almost smiled. "Let's get on with it, then," he said.





Severus fell asleep with his wand beside his pillow. The hijacking had forcefully reminded him not to let his guard down. It made him think of Moody: "Constant vigilance!" He had disliked the old Auror intensely, but the man had been right about that.

Surprisingly, he had a pleasant dream. He was at Hogwarts, seated in the Headmaster's place at the head table. He looked out across the Great Hall, watching the students eating and talking happily among themselves. He felt very pleased and contented. It was so different from his actual experience as Headmaster. He awoke wishing it had been real.

Fawkes was already awake and Severus opened the porthole so the bird could go for a morning flight. The rest of the crew was still asleep, so he went to the mess and helped himself to coffee and a bagel. Seabiscuit made much better coffee than the Hogwarts House-Elves ever had.

He found several issues of *THE QUIBBLER* waiting for him on the table. An owl must have brought them while they were ashore trying to rescue Fawkes. Reluctantly, he picked one up and started to read. Kingsley was now Minister of Magic. Minerva was Headmistress at Hogwarts, and repairs were going well. Lucius and Draco Malfoy had been released from Azkaban and were now under house-arrest at Malfoy Manor. He was reading excerpts from Skeeter's interview with Narcissa when Lydia came in to fix herself some tea.

"Poisonous Plants of Amazonia? How interesting," she said, glancing at one of the books that he'd brought from the dealer's cottage.

Severus raised an eyebrow and looked up at her. "Would you mind telling me exactly how you convinced Mr Shunpike of the error of his ways?" he asked. He needed to know if they could really trust Shunpike. Yes, the lad had



helped them, but it might be prudent to lock him in the cargo hold anyway.

"It wasn't particularly difficult," she told him. "I just waited until the others had left, and then I followed him to the kitchen. He began rummaging in the fridge, probably looking for a cold beer, with his wand stuck in his back pocket. I landed behind him, changed to my human form, and snatched his wand. He hit his head on the fridge shelf and knocked a jug of pineapple juice down his back. I had to cast a cleaning spell on him." She chuckled at the memory.

"Anyway, he told me that he wanted to go somewhere where he could make a new start. He'd planned to slip away from the others as soon as he could after they left the British Isles, but there hadn't been a chance to do it yet. So I told him that his best bet was to help us, and that after we got the boat back, we'd drop him off wherever he wanted. He was a bit reluctant at first, but he could see the sense of it. You aren't going to turn him in, are you?"

"No, but I don't want him causing any trouble," Severus told her. "I'll have a talk with him."

Captain Clark appeared at the door and interrupted them. "We've got to get the crew up. Knight Lines rejected my request for time off. And guess what they want us to do. We're to go pick up some animals from some Aurors in northern Scotland, and return them to their native habitats." He laughed. "We can drop off you and Jack, too, if you want, Lydia."

"No hurry," she said. "This has been the most interesting vacation we've ever had."





Stan was a bit hung over. He was on his way back from the head when Severus confronted him.

"Please step into the cargo hold for a moment, Mr. Shunpike," he said ominously. "I'd like a word with you in private."

Stan looked alarmed, but he did as he was told. "Please don't turn me in or oblivate me or nuffink, sir," he said. "I swear I won't make no trouble for you. I just want ta start over. I never had no chance. I wasn't smart or nuffink. That's why I wanted to be one of 'em. I wanted people to fink I woz important."

Severus snorted. "You're lucky you didn't get yourself killed."

"I don't know what to do. I weren't no good at school. That's why I quit. There weren't no point in it. You know. I woz in your class."

"Actually, you were good with your hands. You prepared your ingredients well, and your brewing skills were adequate. If you'd just paid attention and put some effort into studying, you could have done acceptable work. I told you that. You have to do the work. There are no shortcuts. At least there aren't for most of us."

It still angered him to remember how everything had always been so easy for James Potter. Potter never seemed to study, but the teachers were always praising him. He had it all: a rich family, pure blood, good looks, athletic talent, and all the girls he wanted. Even Lily, in the end. And he never seemed to make any effort. Severus had studied day and night, and nobody really cared. Even Lily, in the end. But it had paid off. Severus had become a skilled and powerful wizard, while James' complacency had got him killed. When the fool had been struck dead, he didn't even have his wand in his hand. It was time to forget James Potter.

"Yeah, some blokes get all the breaks," Stan agreed. "Everyfing always



goes right for 'em."

Severus scowled at him. "Perhaps, but *your* problem is that you believed you couldn't do it, so you never even *tried*. You were defeated by your own attitude. Dropping out of school was stupid. You'll have to get to work now if you want a decent life. It won't happen by itself." He wondered how many times he'd given that advice when he was Head of Slytherin House. He wondered if any students had actually listened.

"I'll try," Stan said quietly. He still had no idea what he was going to do.

"See that you do," Severus told him. "However, we have a more immediate problem at the moment. The boat has been ordered to pick up those animals from the dealer's barn. The place will be swarming with Aurors. I strongly suggest that you stay in the passengers' quarters until we tell you it's safe."

Stan didn't need to be told twice. He vanished down the hall.



Severus knew that, like Stan, he should probably stay below decks, but he was part of the crew and he intended to help with the work. Simple Glamour spells should be sufficient. After all, the Aurors wouldn't be looking for him. Everyone knew that Severus Snape was dead.

He whitened his teeth and straightened them a bit, but not too much — he didn't want to look like Gilderoy Lockhart, with his perfect, sparkling white teeth. That might attract attention. He lightened his eyes to medium brown, and turned his hair brown, too. It had grown fairly long and he tied it back. It had been distressingly fluffy lately, probably because of that fruity-smelling Muggle shampoo that Kat had given him.



It was very un-Snape-like, and under the circumstances, that was good.

The most important thing was to disguise his nose. Most of the younger Aurors would have been his students or his classmates, and they'd be sure to recognize his nose. Flicking his wand, he made it appear as nondescript as possible. He had difficulty disguising the scars on his neck, however. There was still too much residual Dark magic in them, so he made sure that his turtleneck sweater covered them, and he was ready to go.



The Aurors had arrived the previous night shortly after the Dark Mark had appeared in the sky. It had caused a major alarm. They were surprised to find that no one was actually dead, although there were five people lying in cages in a barn, snoring loudly.

The man in charge, Auror Morris, increased the light from his wand and bent down to take a look at them. "It's three of those Death Eaters that escaped from custody. Maybe the fourth is around here somewhere. I don't recognize the other two. You trainees, see if you can find some sort of lights in this place, and then go get that gorilla and bring it in here. And be careful. We don't know if it's safe here yet. The rest of you, start searching the area. Someone must have put these guys in these cages. I'm going to wake 'em up and try to find out what happened here."



It was mid-morning and fog was still lying over the area when Severus apparated to shore with Captain Clark and Kat. They proceeded to the cottage where several Aurors were packing up illegal potion ingredients



and other evidence.

"Would you look at this stuff?" one of the Aurors asked the others. "Human body parts and pieces of endangered species! I hope they lock those guys up and throw away the key."

Auror Morris had questioned the prisoners for most of the night and learned absolutely nothing useful. They were either very confused, or very good liars, or both. Eventually he had given up. He came over and introduced himself to Captain Clark. "We have two wyverns, two orang-utans, and a panda cub for you. My trainees are preparing them for transport. Come to the barn and I'll show you."

When they entered the barn, the prisoners were no longer there. Auror Morris mentioned that they had been picked up and taken to Azkaban, which was good. Even with the best obliviation, some shadows of memory might remain, and seeing all of them again so soon could have triggered dangerous feelings of déjà vu.

"We've put sleeping spells on the animals, and we'll shrink their food for easy transport," Morris said. "It would be best to leave them in their cages, if you can handle the extra weight when you take them side-along back to your boat. You'll have to make several trips."

Severus hadn't been paying any attention to the trainees, but when they came over levitating the sleeping oranges, he nearly had a heart attack. The trainees were Harry Potter and Ron Weasley.





Pomona's Plan



'VE TRIED EVERY CHARM I KNOW, AND EVERYTHING

I could find in the library, and the Hat is still spouting gibberish," Filius told them.

"That's what I was afraid of," Minerva said. "We need to make an alternate plan before the students arrive."

"Well, I've been thinking about it, and I've got some ideas," Pomona announced. "This may be for the best. After all, the parents will be upset if we abandon the sorting tradition, and now many of them will also be upset if their children are sorted into Slytherin. However, if the Hat can't sort, that gives us the excuse we need to make some major changes around here."

"Slytherins are *not* evil," the portrait of Phineas Black shouted. "If Minerva had just stopped to *think* before she kicked them all out..."

"We know that," Filius said, "but Minerva can't change what she did in the heat of the moment. She made a public apology, but I'm afraid that the stigma will last for a generation or two at least."

"Gryffindors never stop to think! That's the whole problem. They always act rashly. Now if the Ministry still had some of those time-turners..."

"But they *don't*, Phineas," the portrait of Albus Dumbledore said firmly, "so really, we will just have to accept the fact that..."

"Please, gentlemen," Minerva interrupted them. The last thing they needed was another portrait shouting match. They might have to put the blasted things out in the hall again. "Please settle down. We would like to listen to Pomona's ideas now."



Under other circumstances, Severus might have laughed out loud to



see Potter and Weasley standing in front of him, dressed as Auror trainees and levitating two cages of orangutans. He had certainly never seen such looks of deep concentration on their young faces in any class. However, the fear that they might recognize him despite his disguise blinded him to the humor of the scene.

Stay calm, he thought to himself. *Appear disinterested, and don't make eye contact.* He had fooled the Dark Lord for many years, so he could certainly fool these two young twits. They made him nervous, though, and he cursed cruel Fate for casting them into his path once again. He also cursed the Dark Lord, Albus Dumbledore, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Aurors, Death Eaters, the whole of wizarding Britain...

Kat stepped forward and took Potter's cage, so Severus stepped forward and took Ron's. They floated the cages out of the barn and apparated back to the boat with them. *So far, so good*, Severus thought as he renewed the sleeping spell on the creatures.



"That panda cub looks pretty heavy," Ron said. "It will probably take both of us to levitate that cage."

"Did you notice anything about that guy?" Harry asked.

"What guy?" asked Ron.

"The one with the long hair who took the orang."

"They both had long hair and took oranges," Ron observed.

"The one with the longer hair and the black turtleneck sweater."

"No. Why?" Ron asked.

"I don't know. He just seems familiar, somehow. Take a closer look



when we give them the cub."



"Don't worry, I'll watch 'em," Seabiscuit said just before Severus and Kat apparated off the deck. He conjured a deckchair beside the sleeping oranges and unrolled a copy of THE DAILY PROPHET. He'd taken out a subscription after he figured out the connection between 'Slade' and Professor Snape.

He scanned it for more Snape stories. Some dame named Rita Skeeter was starting to write a book about Snape, and another one named Celestina Warbeck was planning an opera. She couldn't decide whether to call it "SEVERUS AND LILY", "THE PRINCE'S TALE", or "LILLY POTTER AND THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE", but she promised that it would be a tragedy of epic proportions and there wouldn't be a dry eye in wizarding Britain after the final scene.

"I hope Slade never finds out about *that*," Biscuit mused.

Fawkes perched on the railing beside Biscuit and started looking at the pictures.

Lucius and Draco Malfoy looked relieved as they walked out of the Ministry. They had been pardoned for being Death Eaters. The Wizengamot agreed that they had been forced into it, although THE PROPHET speculated that some hefty bribes to key individuals might have helped them reach that decision.

Argus Filch scowled from a Wanted poster. He was wanted for aiding the Carrows and abusing students, but he and Mrs Norris were nowhere to be found.

A note about the Hog's Head being fined for health violations again was accompanied by a photo of Aberforth feeding his goats.



Hogwarts was advertising for instructors in Muggle Studies and Defense Against the Dark Arts, and THE PROPHET speculated that the latter position was probably still cursed.

In other words, it looked like things were slowly getting back to normal in wizarding Britain.



"You're nuts," said Ron. "He's nothing like Snape. His hair isn't black and greasy, and his nose is way too small."

"Those things can be fixed," Harry said. "He's the same build as Snape, and he moves like Snape."

"And Snape's dead, remember? We watched him die. I know it bugs you, but you've done everything you can. You cleared his name and got him that medal. He's even got a chocolate frog card now, too. Come on, let's go get those wyverns.

The wyverns were young, so they were only about the size of full-grown crocodiles. Each one had two stout legs, a pair of leathery wings, a set of sharp teeth and claws, and a long, barbed tail. They snoozed quietly in their cages under a strong sleeping spell.

"Ugly brutes, aren't they?" Ron said. "It's a good thing they can't breathe fire. Let's take 'em one at a time."

"Maybe he has a brother," Harry said.

"Who? The wyvern? Snape? Are we still on that?"

"I've just got a feeling about him, that's all."

"When you 'get a feeling', it usually means trouble, you know that?" Ron said.



They floated the first cage out into the centre of the barn. The cage was a bit too small, so the unconscious wyvern lay curled up with its tail wrapped around its head and one of its legs was sticking out between the bars. Harry kept casting 'furtive' glances at 'Slade' that were not really as inconspicuous as he thought they were.

Kat knew that 'Slade' was worried about being recognized so he took the lead again.

"Wow! I've never seen one of these before," he said, reaching out curiously to touch the wyvern's scaly leg. Suddenly the beast snorted and kicked in its sleep. Kat tried to jump back but he wasn't fast enough. The claws caught him in the shoulder, tearing deep gashes and knocking him to the floor.

Severus immediately knelt beside Kat and muttered a spell to stop the bleeding. Then he began moving his wand in intricate patterns while singing a healing spell. He was surprised how distressed he felt. It had never occurred to him that he might actually *like* Kat. Which was not to say that the fellow wasn't irritating; he most certainly was, most of the time. But in fact, Severus realized that he liked the captain and Biscuit, too. Being on the boat was sort of like having friends, not that he had much experience with that sort of thing. He gave Kat a vial of pain-killing potion from a pouch on his belt, and Kat gulped it down like a shot of whiskey.

Clark and Morris rushed over and took the wyvern's cage from Harry and Ron. In their shock, the boys had almost dropped it.

"Slade, take Kat back to the boat. Morris and I will finish here," Clark ordered.

"It's just a scratch," Kat mumbled as Severus levitated him out the door.



Morris didn't blame the trainees for the accident. There was no way they could have known that the beast would thrash in its sleep.

"Finish checking this place for evidence," he told them, "and then we'll go back. It's time to get out of here."

The boys couldn't have agreed more.

"I'm sure it's him now," Harry told Ron after Morris left. "I saw him use that spell before, when he healed Draco. It looked like his wand, too."

Ron looked worried. "You know, maybe we're rushing things too fast, after everything we've been through," he said. "Have you thought about taking some time off? We could go to, I don't know, maybe the Mediterranean. We could lie on a beach, drink some Muggle-made wine, watch girls, that sort of thing."

"Did you happen to catch his name?" Harry asked.

Desperately, Ron tried to change the subject. "What's that?" he asked, pointing to a large iron cauldron that was sitting near the back door.



"We will need to create four new Houses," Pomona announced. "We should sort the students randomly, and then rotate them between the Houses every year, so that every student will be in each House at least once, and every student will be in a House with every other student at least once."

"That sounds rather sensible," Filius agreed.

"But what about Quidditch?" Minerva interjected. "We can't stop Quidditch!"

"We won't stop Quidditch," Pomona said. "The students will have to



form new teams every year, and learn to work with new teammates. It will be a good experience for them.

"We can name the new Houses after chimeras, to symbolize the mixing," she added.

"Chimeras?" Minerva asked, scratching her head.

Horace looked perplexed. The portrait of Phineas Black guffawed. The portrait of Albus Dumbledore snored.

"Yes," said Pomona. There are lots to choose from: griffons, wyverns, sphinxes, quetzalcoatl's..."

"Quetzalcoatl's?" said Minerva. What would be next? Snorkacks? "Perhaps we should call them something a bit more, well, bland. To help keep down the House rivalry, of course."

"Maybe we should name them after colors," Filius suggested.

"Yes, but then they should be new colors, like purple and orange," Pomona said happily. "Maybe pink and turquoise, too. That would be nice."

"I think we should all give this matter further thought, and meet again tomorrow," Minerva told them. She was starting to get a headache.



A Visit to Wales



"IS IT SETTLED, THEN?" MINERVA ASKED. "THE NEW

Houses will be named North, South, East, and West, and each will be housed in its own tower."

"I think I prefer the chimeras," Filius muttered.

"Towers?" said Pomona. "But they're so cold and drafty!

Why not underground? It would be much easier to heat them." She loved Hufflepuff's cozy underground quarters. They had long been her home, and they were conveniently close to the kitchens in case one wanted a midnight snack. "Some of us aren't that fond of heights, you know," she pouted.

Horace didn't look too happy, either. He knew they would have to close the Slytherin quarters if they wanted to break with the past, but he didn't like it.

"It's a matter of practicality," Minerva told them. "The castle has quite a few towers, some of which aren't being used, and we can have four redone to house the new Houses. We all have to make sacrifices."

"But Gryffindor seems to be making less than some of the rest of us," Horace said coldly.

Minerva sighed. The old House rivalries were not going to evaporate overnight.



"The captain says Kat will be fine. He just needs a day or two to rest and heal," Jack told Lydia.

"I'm so glad," Lydia said. "It seems that Mr Slade has a talent for healing. He's a strange one, that Mr Slade. Very talented, and very troubled."



"And very grouchy," Jack added.

"Yes, that too," Lydia said, laughing.

"I've been thinking about young Stanley," she said. "We've been talking about getting some help at the bookstore. Maybe we should give him a try."

"Ah ha!" said Jack. "You're into your 'helping people' thing again, aren't you?"

"Of course. I have a talent for it, as you well know."

"It's one of the many reasons why I love you, dear," he said, taking her hand. "Of course we can try Stan at the shop when we get home, if you like." He paused for a moment. "I'm sorry we didn't get to Rome."

"Rome will still be there next year," Lydia said. "And it won't be nearly as exciting as this was. I can't wait to tell Junior all about it. He'll just flip!"

"That he will," Jack agreed. "Come on, let's go watch them unload the wyverns. We've never been to Wales before, after all."



It had been a short hop to the wyvern preserve in North Wales, and the wizard in charge had been delighted to receive the two young creatures.

"They've been mistreated!" he said angrily, "but we'll have them as good as new in no time!"

He turned to one of the still-sleeping beasts, reached into its cage, and scratched its pointy ear. "Kitchy koo, iddle one," he crooned, "You're going to be very happy here in your new home."

He's as bad as Hagrid, Severus thought to himself, which turned his mind to Hogwarts. The summer was getting on now, and the students would be returning soon. He had been there, first as one of them, and later waiting for them, for most of his life. *I ought to be there now,* he



thought. Who would protect the children? Minerva would, of course, and that would probably be fine for the present; she was certainly quite capable, but she might want retire in the foreseeable future. Pomona and Filius were both excellent teachers, but they weren't forceful enough to lead the school. Horace wasn't either, and he would likely return to retirement soon, in any event.

Then Severus got a grip on himself. What was he thinking? He did *not* care. His years at Hogwarts could hardly have been described as 'pleasant', after all. No, he had had more than enough of that place, and he had done more than enough for the students. He had gone out and almost *died* for them.

But he had gone out to die for *her*, hadn't he? Or to atone for his many sins. Probably all of those things. It wasn't quite so clear to him anymore.

He shook his head and chased the thoughts away. He was Solomon Slade now, Security Officer on Knight Boat Number Six. His previous life was over and done with. And he was glad of it!

He did miss his potions lab, though.



"Those hand-things were *creepy*!" Ron said, shuddering at the memory. "And I thought spiders were bad! What the heck made you open that thing, anyway?"

Even with Morris and the others helping, it had taken quite a while to round up all the hands and get them back into the cauldron. Morris had not been amused.

"I don't know," Harry said. "Sometimes my curiosity just gets the better



of me, I guess. Usually, it pays off somehow.”

“Well, it didn’t this time. Like Morris said, an Auror needs to *think* before acting. We’re lucky Morris didn’t kick us out of the program. He probably would have, if we weren’t so famous.”

Being the Chosen One certainly had its advantages, as well as its disadvantages.

“We’re lucky we didn’t get strangled,” Harry admitted. “I guess I need to be more careful.”

“Good plan,” Ron said sarcastically.

Neither of them noticed the long-fingered hand clinging to the hem of Harry’s robe.



Captain Clark delayed their departure from Wales for as long as he could so Jack and Lydia would have the afternoon to tour the wyvern preserve and visit Portmeirion. Besides which, Biscuit wanted to do some shopping and buy fresh bananas for the orangutans.

Jack showed off their photographs that evening after supper. There were some good ones of the wyverns being fed sides of beef, and several of the two of them waving from the central plaza in Portmeirion.

“Hey, I know that place!” said Biscuit. “It was in that weird TV show about the spy who refused to be filed, sorted, stamped, indexed or numbered. It was called *The Prisoner*, wasn’t it? I saw a few episodes when I was a kid, but I didn’t really understand it.

“I know what you mean,” Jack said. “When I saw it, I was going through this phase where I was really into Muggle culture. I was reading every spy





thriller I could get my hands on, and then I started watching the show and became obsessed with trying to figure out whose side the characters were really on. I identified with the main character's struggle for freedom and individuality, but I think the main point at the end was that we are all ultimately imprisoned by ourselves, and until we face that fact, we can never hope to be truly free."

"Yes," said Lydia, "we blame others for categorizing and restricting us, but we categorize ourselves, too, and we become trapped in the roles that we create for ourselves. The self can be our worst enemy. It can keep us from seeing things as they really are, like when we're in denial and that sort of thing, but most of us never even realize it."

Severus looked over at Stan, who was listening quietly and drinking tea. Stan had decided that he was just a stupid nobody, and it had become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Stan had accepted that role and become trapped in it.

Maybe some day Severus might realize that he could be trapped in some of his own roles, too.



They dropped off the panda cub next because he was flatulent. His supply of bamboo was starting to go off, despite the preservation spell, and it was giving him gas. They were all getting tired of casting air-freshening charms.

Dr Wong, a dedicated Muggle researcher, was entering data into his laptop when the strange-looking boat popped up in the river at the panda preserve and they ran out the gangplank. "Y'all makin' some kinda



crazy Hollywood movie?" he asked.

Severus raised an eyebrow and gave Kat a puzzled look.

"We bought our translation spell from some old guy in Nacogdoches," Kat whispered, "and it makes everybody seem to be speaking corny cowboy English. He's really speaking a Chinese dialect, I guess. Merlin only knows what we sound like to him."

Severus looked pained at the thought.

"That's right, Pardner," Clark said via the spell. "We were shootin' a little ol' kung fu Western, and the local constabulary asked us to mosey on over here and drop off this stolen doggie that they recovered."

Dr Wong burst out laughing when he heard that, but he stopped when he saw the cub. "Why, his li'l ears are missin'!" he said. "Them rustlers done *mutilated* the poor critter! I hope they hang those mangy varmints!"

"They're gonna be in the hoosegow for a long, long time," Clark assured him as the cub farted loudly and headed for the nearest stand of bamboo.

Furtively, Kat cast a spring-breeze charm.

"Y'all want ta stay fer tea?" Wong asked them. "The cookhouse is just round the back, and Cookie makes a mean pot o' tea."

"Thanks, Pardner, but we've gotta ride," Clark said. "Y'all take care, now, ya hear?"



They were on their way to Borneo to drop off the oranges when the albatross landed on the deck. It kicked up a fuss and wouldn't give up its letter until Biscuit fed it two tins of sardines.

Drama queen, Fawkes snorted, scowling at the big seabird.



"It's for you, Kat," Biscuit announced when he finally managed to retrieve the envelope.

"It's from my sister, Angie," Kat said happily, but his smile evaporated as he read it. "She says she needs help. Angie *never* admits she needs help. I've gotta go. She needs me."

"Where is she, and what's going on?" Clark asked. He could probably get along without his First Mate for a day or two, but he wasn't keen on the idea.

"Angie's at the Bayou Academy. She says they were getting the school ready for the students to return, and something attacked a couple of the faculty members. They're comatose now, and the mediwizards can't revive them. Angie and another Agent were sent to investigate.

"Can't they just call in more Agents?" Clark asked.

"Angie says her partner just quit and took off for New Orleans. The two of them had gone out searching the swamps, and they ran into some sort of ghoulish thing. It nearly got her partner and it scared the daylights out of her. She says she was lucky to escape with her sanity."

Kat didn't stop to make disparaging remarks about his sister's sanity, so they all realized that he must be seriously worried about her.

"Kat, your sister is an Agent, a highly trained wizard cop. If she can't handle this thing, what could you possibly do to help?" Clark asked. "If it's as bad as she says, then they need to send more Agents."

"The Agency told her that they're short-handed and they can't send anyone else for at least a week," Kat said, holding up the letter. "It's up to her to hold the fort. Potential students and their parents are visiting the school to evaluate it, and Angie is afraid for them and the teachers. Angie and I both went to the Bayou Academy," Kat added proudly, as if that had



anything to do with the matter.

"Okay, then," Clark said unhappily. "We have to drop off the apes and take Jack and Lydia to Melbourne. Then I'll drop you at Bayou. I suppose I can get one of those extra numbskulls from Knight Lines to help out while you're gone, if I need to."

To Be Continued...





Knight Lines
Transport

HERE BEGINS THE CONTINUING ADVENTURES OF SEVERUS (SOLOMON SLADE) SNAPE, AND THE CREW OF KNIGHT BOAT #6, IN 'BIRDS OF A FEATHER'.

UPDATES TO THE ORIGINAL WORK MAY BE FOUND ON WOLFWillow's PAGE ON FF.NET

FURTHER ADVENTURES, AS THEY CONCLUDE, WILL BE POSTED AS SEPARATE WORKS HERE ON RED HEN PUBLICATIONS.



Colophon

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