

Selene gnaws on ginger root and clenches her talons into my shoulder.

“Can you worry a little softer?” I urge her.

“Who says I’m worried?” Selene flaps her wings in agitation as a cloaked figure drifts through the fog and comes into focus. As the water undulates around the ferryman’s boat, I can see his name carved into the wood: Charon. I will admit, he does seem menacing; however, his services have excellent reviews. One article claimed his transportation is “To die for.”

Coming out of my daze, I see that Charon has docked and climbs up to greet us. “Welcome. I appreciate your patronage. I must insist upon payment before you enter the craft, lest your souls be lost to the ethereal plane.”

I pull the obols from my pocket and place one in my mouth. Selene reluctantly releases her grip to grab the silver coin and mimic me.

“Very well.” Charon takes my hand and helps me to enter the bobbing ferry.

He unties the rope and pushes the boat away from the dock. I sit on the stool as Selene wraps her wing around my neck. The air is surprisingly cool as the river mists my face. We traverse in silence until Charon asks, “What brings you?”

“I am looking for a very specific birthday gift,” I responded. Selene huffs.

Looking at my dragon and then me, the ferryman says, “I assume you are looking to find another familiar, then?”

“For my spouse, yes. Selene is not looking forward to the company.”

“Dogs are too much trouble. They make such a mess,” moans Selene.

“Yes, but some dragons also set fire to my curtains. Drool is less flammable.”

“I said I was sorry, didn’t I?”

Charon interrupts before the bickering escalates. “Domestic or exotic?”

Olive Willis

1

“She wants something domestic. Exotic veterinarians can be so hard to find back home, though my family has had Terran creatures in the past.”

“Oh?” Charon asks.

“When I was young, we had an Earthhound. Specifically, my family had what is called a golden retriever. My father had a single-headed snake. Mom had a flock of chickens.”

“Chickens? Never heard of them.”

“They are like the cockatrice except the body matches the head. The wings aren’t leathery, and their bodies have no scales. Chickens can’t even turn you into stone.”

“Seems... boring.”

“Most exotics are, in my opinion. I prefer the local fauna,” I say as I scratch Selene under her chin. She coos. “Currently, my spouse and I share a house with this fussy, cat-sized dragon. Also, we have a dragon-sized cat. I figured that he was too large for the boat.”

“I appreciate the forethought.”

The conversation trickled off. It is just as well. Through the haze, I see a row of brick shops lining the edge of the river. Sconces illuminate the shop signs, and I find the one we need: The River Sticks Adoption and Rehabilitation Center. Charon docks the ferry. He mumbles for us to go ahead, mentioning something about needing catmint. Selene chitters nervously.

“I promise I will make this up to you,” I bargain. “You can pick out whatever you would like from the shop.”

Before Selene can respond, the door swings open and nearly clips her wing. A man stumbles out, carrying a squirming jackalope in a sweater. He mutters an apology and continues walking and wrestling his familiar.

Olive Willis

2

Watching, Selene turns to me and says, “if you ever try to clothe me, I will set fire to the curtains again.”

We step into the most beautiful menagerie I have ever seen. The River Sticks has an incredible array of animals, some of which I have only ever heard of. Each future family member has a small tag attached to their enclosures with their stories.

One wall is filled with tanks of baby sea serpents, fosters from Loch Ness. An aviary houses a phoenix with shimmering, golden feathers. She has a patched wing but is aflame with life. Two stray, desert amphisbaenas bask under heat lamps. One snoozes while the other takes advantage of his two heads to munch on a rat from either end. Then, we see a room with every type of griffin imaginable. The personality types seem to be as varied as their appearances.

Blue fur and feathers flash by. Two young night heron-Russian blue hybrids wrestle. A kingfisher-orange tabby mix taunts a younger raven-Bombay. My favorites are a bonded pair of siblings. The kestrel-calico is snuggled up against a peregrine falcon-Bengal.

Suddenly, I hear a loud, “Aha! I found my prize!” I had not noticed that Selene left her perch on my shoulder. There is a faint jingling, and I go over to the cash register where she is playing with the bowl marked “take a coin, leave a coin”. A middle-aged woman working behind the counter chuckles.

“Selene! This was not what I had in mind,’ I chide.

“Don’t worry about it! She has been well-mannered and deserves a reward. Besides, I have spares behind the counter. Was there something else I can help you with?” She asks.

“My wife’s birthday is next week, and she has always wanted a dog of her own.”

“Does she have a preference for breed?”

“Her primary criteria was one we could adopt. Beyond that, I know she loves fuzzy, pointy ears and fluffy fur.”

Olive Willis

3

“I might have a perfect match! We just had this one arrive last week.” She motions for Selene and me to follow her into the adjacent room. Immediately, I am in love with the golden brown eyes and large, triangular ears.

“She... is perfect.” I bend down to introduce myself to our new family member. She plods over and begins to lick my face. Then, I kiss each of her three heads and look into her six eyes. “You are the sweetest cerberus puppy I have ever seen. Hecate, you are coming home with us.”

