



The Hellhound Grawl (The Griffin Sanctuary #8)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A new variety of hellhound has landed in the Griffin Sanctuary and its causing trouble with the other animals and starting fires. Charlotte and the team of experts will have to try every trick in the book to look after this strange hellhound while making sure the entire sanctuary doesnt go up in flames.

The Hellhound Grawl is book 8 in the modern fantasy Griffin Sanctuary series. It is packed full of adventure, mythical creatures, and a sapphic romantic sub-plot.

If you enjoy mythical creatures, zoo documentaries, slow burn sapphic romantic sub-plots, and a heroine who loves animals, youre going to love The Unicorn Herd.

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ONE

I never thought I would miss the smell of unicorn poop but when I entered the Unicorn House, a wave of nostalgia hit me. I hadn't spent much time as an intern here and yet, this place always felt a little like home. Luckily, I had a good excuse for coming here often.

"Felicity!" I shouted, raising the cups of coffee in my hands.

My girlfriend grinned and paused the wheelbarrow of fresh hay in front of me. There was a slight sheen of sweat on her forehead and her arms were toned from all the hard labour, something I loved to see.

She leaned in to kiss me, infecting me with her smile. I was so glad that we made it through our rough patch because just seeing her always cheered me up.

"Which coffee is mine?" she asked, holding out her hand for one of the cups.

"Who says one of them is for you? Maybe I bought Nissan coffee," I teased while I handed her the one on the left.

Felicity stuck out her tongue. "Cute."

"I know." I took a sip of my own coffee and went over to the fence so I could look at the unicorn herd. They were grazing fairly close by and in the low afternoon light, their silver fur shimmered opalescent and made them look even more majestic.

I sought out my secret favourite, Sticker the rescue, pleased to find him right next to Candle.

They were doing typical unicorn things like nudging each other with their snout and pressing their bodies together.

It would've been a happy sight if it wasn't for a jealous Criss who was giving them shady side-eyes, no doubt waiting for a moment of distraction to steal Candle's attention away.

"So we still have a love triangle?" I noted.

Felicity sighed. "Don't talk to me about it. I've spent most of my morning trying to keep them apart. Criss tried to bite me."

"Did he manage?"

"Luckily not. But he did stomp on my foot so you know, yay for sturdy boots." She leaned on the railing while she admired the unicorns with stars in her eyes. "Even so, I love spending time with them. I don't know why it's so calming but when I'm here, the world always feels so much calmer."

I nodded. "I know what you mean. This is my favourite place on the entire planet."

"Even better than my bed?" Felicity teased.

A laugh bubbled up from within me. "No comment."

Luckily, she didn't look insulted and there was no reason for her to be. Part of what made the Unicorn House so peaceful and wonderful was that I could always find Felicity here and that it was filled with memories of us working together.

Felicity leaned against me, her head landing on my shoulder.

We stood side by side, watching the herd going about their daily business.

The Sergeant at the front, scoping out the terrain for any dangers, while the others grazed to their heart's content.

The old-timer of the group, Jun-Jun, was hobbling at the back.

Her bad leg was getting worse with time, even though we were doing everything we could, and I knew a hard decision would have to be made about her at some point soon.

Unlike people, animals didn't understand prolonging suffering.

Thinking about that put a heavy knot in my stomach so I focused my attention on Sticker who was thriving.

He did a few funny jumps and it brought a smile to my lips.

When he first came in, malnourished and without a horn, I would never have imagined that he'd ever look like this.

He was in great health and living the perfect unicorn life.

The only thing better would be if they were out in the wild.

My walkie-talkie crackled and Jacob's recognisably deep voice came through it. "Jacob to apprentices. Next meeting in twenty minutes at Quarantine."

"Looks like the peace and my break are over," I said as I grabbed the device. I

brought it to my mouth to reply. "Charlotte here. Heard. I'll be there."

Some of the others answered too but I ignored them because having a moment with Felicity was more important.

She pulled me closer by my hips and kissed my nose. "I'll see you after work?"

I nodded. "Yours or mine?"

"All my flatmates are going to be at mine. Yours?"

"Sounds good. I do think Tamara will be there but one flatmate is better than three, right?"

She nodded and kissed me again, this time properly. It wasn't something I would want to do in front of people but our only audience was a very ambivalent group of unicorns who couldn't care less.

We broke apart and I checked my phone for the time, calculating how much time I had to get from here to Quarantine.

"Go," Felicity encouraged. "Otherwise, you'll be late."

She was right and that was part of what I loved so much about her, she would never ask me to compromise my career for her. I wouldn't the other way around either.

I kissed her one more time, waved goodbye to the unicorns, and set in motion to find out what animal was in need this time.

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TWO

I reached Quarantine with only a few minutes to spare but luckily, reception was empty save for Hatty who had made herself home on top of the keyboard. The little house sphinx looked up and rolled on her back when she saw me, causing something on the computer to ding in error.

"You're a chaos monster," I said as I picked Hatty up so she didn't cause more havoc. Once, she deleted the entire week schedule and had thrown everything in chaos. Knowing the sphinx, she had enjoyed it too.

She meowed softly and pressed her head into my hand, desperate for a bit of affection.

"You're so demanding," I said while I stroked her and conducted a secret check. Her fur was looking beautiful and shiny which was a good sign that she was nice and healthy. On top of that, her horns were growing properly and her nose wasn't dry and cracked.

Hatty didn't stay in my arms for long and jumped out onto the window sill where there was a perfectly good patch of sun too, it just didn't cause carnage in the practice.

"I swear, sometimes I'm convinced you do this on purpose."

The sphinx looked me dead in the eye, held my gaze for a very deliberate moment like she absolutely understood what I was saying, before yawning and rolling

innocently into the sun.

I continued on to the meeting room where I was the first of the apprentices to arrive. Jacob was already there, but looked like he hadn't slept in days.

He hid a yawn. "Ah, Charlotte. How are you?"

"Not bad. You? You look tired."

He checked his reflection in a metal piece on the coffee maker. "Oh, I do, don't I?"

"I thought things were calming down since almost all of the animals from the private collection have been moved."

Jacob flattened some of his hair. "It is on the animal front but IREMA has been on me for the case they're building against the owners. I'm happy to do it so justice can be delivered but they're very demanding."

I wondered if I could ask more questions about that or if it wasn't my place. Before I could, some of the other apprentices arrived and I joined them at one of the tables while Jacob grabbed his tablet.

Tamara sat down next to me, loudly chewing gum. She leaned over. "Just as a heads-up, some school friends are visiting me tomorrow, so it might get a bit rowdy."

I did what I could to muffle my frustration. "How many friends?"

"Not that many. Three, but only two are staying over. Is it okay if they crash on the couch?"

"Umm. I guess." Maybe it wasn't a huge amount but three more people in an already

small flat didn't sound very appealing. Especially not if Felicity was going to come over, that was way too many heads.

I grabbed my phone to message her, not super pleased about having to change our plans. It could get busy in her flat too and that wasn't really what I wanted after a long day of work.

Tamara seemed to pick up on my mood. "Is there an issue? You have your girlfriend over all the time so I thought it would be fine."

She did have a point, although Felicity was usually in my room and didn't want to play drinking games which Tamara's friends almost definitely would.

I forced a smile. "No, it's fine. It's your home, too."

She nodded and got her phone out, hopefully not to invite more people. Even though I didn't dislike her as much as I did in the beginning, I didn't think we would ever be great friends.

Jacob cleared his throat, silencing the chatter. "Alright, I'm going to keep it brief. The jackalopes have been fighting again and will need treatment and company."

"I can do that," Tamara said quickly. "I love fluffy animals."

"Good." Our mentor continued. "I also need someone to assist Maria with the pregnant peryton. Ivan, I had you in mind for this because it'll come with research on why her birth control failed."

The third-year apprentice nodded. "I can handle it."

"And then we've got a new arrival from the private collection, a hellhound. He's the

one who's been setting off the fire alarm which is causing a lot of frustration and stress. Charlotte, since you have experience with fiery animals, can you assist me?"

I wasn't sure if it was a good or bad sign that I was the only one who wasn't working independently but it didn't really matter, this was how Jacob divided up the labour and that was that.

I didn't mind, it was my first time seeing a hellhound so I was looking forward to it.

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THREE

I accompanied Jacob to the bay the hellhound was in, surprised to find a big piece of paper taped on the door. Someone had gone through the trouble of writing a warning on it.

Don't enter without protective gear. Let room air out before entering.

I looked at my mentor who was just wearing his white coat. "Do we have protective gear?"

He laughed and put his arm in front of the lower half of his face. "Just don't breathe in too deep."

That was a curious thing to say which made me all the more intrigued.

I mimicked his movement, covering my mouth and nose without understanding why.

Then he opened the door and a dense, suffocating smell wafted out that made my eyes sting.

It was acrid and reminded me of sulfur, pee, and cleaning alcohol.

I made the mistake of gasping and it assaulted the back of my throat. I coughed and inhaled more and coughed until the normal air from the hallway had diluted the stench enough to make it bearable.

Jacob observed me with a concerned look. "You okay there?"

I nodded even though my lungs were burning. "All good. What is that smell?"

"Hellhounds have an interesting metabolism and their sweat, saliva, and pee contain high levels of alcohol and a few other noxious substances."

"Noxious is right." I wafted clean air into my face, grateful for a non-burning breath.

"We just need to wait for the gas to escape because if he sparks a fire, that could engulf the room in flames instantly."

"Is that why the fire alarm has been going off so often recently?" I asked.

"Yes, our new hellhound is to blame. It would be better if the room was properly ventilated but that's far too high tech." He stuck his head into the bay and nodded. "Alright, I think it's safe for us to go in but keep the door open. And if he does set himself on fire, make a run for it."

This was certainly an unusual way to meet a new animal but I was more intrigued than worried.

I followed him into the room, getting my first look at the hellhound.

He was smaller than expected, but mostly because he was severely malnourished and crouched in the corner.

If he stood up straight, his head would probably reach up to my elbow. Maybe even my shoulder.

His ribs and hips were poking through his skin and he was covered in dark fur. There

were silver scars all over his body, some that looked relatively fresh.

"Oh, he is in bad shape," I blurted out, horrified by the sight.

The hellhound flinched at the sound of my voice and growled, baring all his teeth at me. He was trembling and shaking, clearly not used to human company or not keen on it.

Judging from the scars, my guess would be the latter.

Jacob cleared his throat. "The owner of the private collection had him chained up as a guard dog.

But despite their fierce looks, hellhounds aren't very aggressive.

The fire is mostly for self-defence. So when our boy here tried to run away instead of attack, he got thrown in a small cage and was pretty much neglected. "

Both anger and sadness curled through me. People could be so cruel, and I wanted to lock the owner of the private collection in a small cage. If he went to jail, that could come true, and I'd never wished for more.

"He's not eating," I noted, pointing at his food bowl that was still full of raw meat. He was also ignoring the soft bed that had been put out for him, favouring the corner instead.

"No, I think he's too stressed to eat," Jacob responded with a sigh. "It's something we need to change because, as you can see, he's skin and bones."

"Poor guy. What's his name?" I asked.

"Gold Flame Obsidian."

"Sorry?"

"You heard me. That's what's on the paperwork."

"That's stupid," I blurted out, more anger rising up in me. That wasn't the kind of name you gave an animal you were going to love.

Jacob chuckled and nodded. "I agree."

I crouched down to bring myself to eye height with the hellhound. "Don't you worry, we won't call you that ridiculous name. How about... Obie?"

He growled again and cowered even more. Clearly the sight of me was striking fear in his heart, making it very clear what sort of interaction he'd had with people. Poor thing.

I didn't understand how anyone could treat an animal like this, regardless of whether it was a common dog or a mythical hellhound. It was barbaric and cruel and awful.

Jacob grabbed the chart from the side, scanning the results from the initial check-up. "Alright, initial blood results. Let's see. Oh, hmmm. They flagged something that needs more investigation and are requesting us to draw extra blood samples."

As if the hellhound heard us, he flattened his ears and let out the most menacing growl yet. His lips curled up to expose the full row of large teeth and he scraped his paw over the tiled ground. His nails were far too long and crackled with every scrape.

Jacob pushed my arm. "Out!"

I stood still for a moment too long, watching in fascination as the hellhound's nails created a shower of sparks that set him and the vapour around him on fire.

The sudden blast of heat made me brace, and I was glad that there was a good amount of distance between us because any closer, and I would have gotten singed.

The hellhound howled and shook his body in a very doglike way, spewing fire through the bay. Seconds later, the fire alarm blared deafeningly loud, and I quickly hurried out when I realised staying was foolish.

Jacob closed the door and signalled to someone to deal with the fire alarm, which was so loud, it was an assault on my eardrums.

I watched the hellhound through the window, amazed that he didn't seem affected by the actual flames. Was it not hot? Did his coat protect him or was the fire not that hot? I wanted to know but going back in was far too dangerous.

"Shouldn't we put him out?" I asked, thinking back to the time when I worked with the phoenixes. "Can we hose him down? Although that seems really mean."

"No, the gas and vapour will burn up quickly and he'll extinguish naturally," Jacob said, also keeping a close eye on the hellhound. "Drawing more blood without sedation is going to be tricky."

He was right. We were going to have to find a way to get close to Obie without him setting us and himself on fire.

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FOUR

The library was nice and quiet, like the haven it always was. Ivan was sitting at one of the tables with his laptop and a few books spread around him, no doubt studying up on something for his own case. He nodded when he saw me and moved one of the books, symbolically making space for me.

“Thanks.” I sat down and gave him a polite smile. “Researching the perytons?”

He nodded. “I’m reading a very long and very detailed paper about birth control. There are a few different kinds that are used with perytons and their like, all which should be very effective. So why do we have a pregnant peryton doe on our hands?”

“I don’t know.”

“No, me either.” Frustration marred his features.

“So while perytons are mammals, they have avian features. The wings are clearly birdlike, the head and forebody is very much like a deer. But their backside depends from individual to individual. Some have hooves, others have talons. Maybe for this pregnant doe, they’re more bird than mammal so their birth control should’ve been adjusted to account for that?

I don’t know and nobody else seems to know! ”

I sympathised with him. As exciting as the unknown, extraordinary, and rare was, it could also be challenging and frustrating.

There were millions of papers, blogs, and experiences written down online about common cats, dogs, and the like.

Doing research was something that could be done on a very large scale.

But working with mythical animals? A handful of personal accounts, if we were lucky.

Ivan rubbed his forehead and sighed. “What are you working on? Hellhound?”

I nodded. “I was trying to see if I could get access to any of his records from the private collection. Like where he came from, how long he’d been there, if there were any other hellhounds. That sort of thing. I thought they’d be in his file but there’s nothing.”

“Ah, you’ll have to request them,” Ivan said as he typed something on his keyboard.

“I’ve sent you the email address of our contact at IREMA.

There’s no need to bother with flowery language or introductions, just be short and to the point or they’ll get confused about exactly what information you’re requesting.”

“Sounds like you’re speaking from experience.”

He let out a light scoff. “Oh yeah. They’re terrible at reading emails. Too much information overwhelms them. Good luck.”

That didn’t sound very encouraging but I had no choice. If I wanted to find out more about Obie’s background, this was the avenue I had to follow. I typed out an email, making sure to attach Obie’s case number, and sent it off feeling quite nervous and hopeful that I did it right.

Then I went on my research spree which was the reason I came into the library in the first place. As a species, hellhounds were very rare and not many of them ever made it to captivity.

I spent some time on Mythix asking questions and trying to find someone who had experience with them, but all my inquiries were coming back with apologies, meaning I was on my own for this one.

Somehow, I was going to have to figure out how to calm down a hellhound that could combust, trim his nails so they weren't so long that it was making his paws curl, and get him to eat so he could regain weight and strength.

It wasn't just the fire that was an issue, the fact that he was very hostile was also a problem. He looked like a hound that if got really scared, he would bite and mean it.

I found an old paper on hellhounds and scanned it, but it was mostly a lot of scientific talk about the exact compounds of his nails and his sweat.

It was full of terms I didn't understand but it likened his nails to firesteel rods used for camping that caused sparks when struck.

It meant that grinding them down would only be possible if there was nothing flammable nearby.

Unfortunately, a flammable hellhound was always attached to the nails.

Maybe if I washed him, that would prevent the sparks from catching? But Obie didn't seem like he would be open to taking a bath. Of course, it would be possible to sedate him, but that was risky, especially considering how bad his health was.

No, it would be better if I could cut his nails without having to put him under. Maybe

cutting them with some bolt cutters would be better? If I could get close enough.

This was a challenge. With small and angry animals, putting them in a pillowcase or towel could make them manageable. For a large creature like Obie, that wasn't possible.

I thought back to my time with the royal sphinxes. They were probably just as lethal and dangerous so how did we handle them? Training.

Except that Obie wasn't eating at the moment. If he wasn't food motivated, teaching him to be calm and to let me touch his feet was going to be impossible.

Was sedation really the only option?

Noise made me look up from my laptop and I realised Hattie had sauntered in with a look that made it clear she had just woken up from a nap. She walked up to the box with puzzle toys and rolled against it, very clear about her demands.

I got up from my chair so I could grab the treats and the games. It was fascinating that she knew how to ask for enrichment but I didn't mind, it was a welcome distraction from trying to figure out how to help Obie.

Hattie used a chair to hop onto the table so she could watch me line up three cups. I put a treat under one of them and moved them around while Hatty kept a keen eye on them.

"Which one has the treat?" I asked, lining the cups up again. I didn't even know myself but it wasn't important. I wasn't trying to hustle someone out of money.

Hattie swatted one of the cups away with her paw, causing it to tumble onto the ground. There was no treat under it, and she slapped another one away.

"Hey, there's no need for violence." I collected the cups and picked up the last one, revealing the treat.

The house sphinx gobbled it up and then stared at me, clearly wanting me to reset the game.

We continued playing until she had enough food, which was good, it hadn't always been this easy to feed her. There had been a lot of trial and error to find something she liked.

Maybe we were feeding Obie the wrong thing?

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FIVE

I grimaced when I entered Obie's bay, the smell an assault to my senses. It would be so much better if we could move him somewhere open-air, but without confirming he didn't have any secret diseases, he wasn't allowed to leave Quarantine.

He growled from his corner when he saw me, his back leg quivering. He looked absolutely terrified, and my heart broke for him. I didn't want to think about the horrors he had to go through to be this scared. As expected, his bowl of food was untouched even though he had to be starving.

"It's just me," I said, setting down my box with treats I prepared earlier. I wasn't sure if this was a waste of time, but I knew I had to try.

I sat down on the ground and picked up the first piece of chicken. The prep kitchen had been so kind to let me take a small piece of all sorts of meat and vegetables meant for the other residents in the sanctuary.

"Bit of chicken," I said, tossing the cube through the metal bars. It landed in front of Obie with a splat, but he didn't seem the slightest bit interested in it.

So not chicken. I crossed it off my list, glad that I had lots of other options with me.

I picked up something very slippery and soft. I tossed it towards the hellhound. "Liver. It's full of iron. It's good for you."

Obie pressed himself even more into the corner, his teeth still on display.

It was too early to be discouraged and I carried on, moving on through the other meats. Duck, pork, mince, there was even some beef that was more expensive than anything I'd ever had myself. Our animals were getting the good stuff, that was for sure.

The hellhound wasn't impressed and ignored all the cubes of meat, although as time went on, throwing things into the bay seemed to agitate him less and less.

At least that was a measure of progress, even if he wasn't eating it and I hadn't thought about how to remove the random chunks of food from the floor.

That was a problem for later.

"I know you're scared, but you have to eat. Are you into vegetables instead?" I asked, hoping that talking would get him used to my voice.

I tossed in a few pieces of carrot, twin apples that were the unicorns' favourite, some cucumber, a leaf of lettuce that should've gone to the jackalopes next door, all sorts of things. None seemed to charm Obie.

"You're a picky eater, huh?" I leaned against the wall, wondering if I was doing something wrong. Maybe he didn't like his food coming to him? Some animals had a high prey drive so perhaps Obie would prefer to chase his dinner.

Unfortunately, that wasn't possible at the moment. And considering how hungry he was, it shouldn't matter either. He should be scarfing down any morsel of food he could.

The only thing I could come up with was that he was far too stressed to eat, or this was just not the right food.

With a sigh, I grabbed my phone and opened up the Mythix platform, hoping to find an old forum or thread that I hadn't seen yet about hellhounds. Surely, someone somewhere in the world knew what they liked to eat and how to take care of them.

This was the basics of the basics. I hadn't even gotten to thinking about cutting his nails, washing him, or getting his wounds cleaned up. If there was alcohol in his sweat, at least that should be helping with keeping it disinfected.

While researching, I stumbled upon a video from someone working with rescue dogs and how to gain their trust. It was all about non-confrontational behaviour, persistently showing up, and letting them move at their own pace.

Some of the rescues took months to get used to being handled, which was definitely not ideal. We were going to need a solution much faster because he was setting off the fire alarm multiple times a week, and we couldn't have that sort of thing.

But at least I had an idea where to start.

"I guess you're a rescue and sort of like a dog," I said, pleased that speaking wasn't making him growl extra anymore. So he was getting used to my presence, it was just slow going.

That was fine with me. I was used to sitting and waiting. I'd done it with Kiki the kitsune, I'd done it watching Cinder the phoenix hatch. I could do it for Obie too.

My walkie-talkie came on. "Vet assistance needed at the Peryton Park."

The distorted sound spooked Obie, and his ears flattened as he scraped his paws over the ground.

The movements made his long nails spark and ignited his whole body.

It was an amazing thing to witness. His red eyes were shimmering from the fire, and the flames engulfed him, making him seem truly terrifying.

I knew I should leave, but I was mesmerised by the sight of him. He looked so ferocious, but all I could see was a sad dog that was scared of his own shadow.

The fumes travelled outside and set off the alarm. The horrible sound assaulted my ears and jolted me in motion so I could tell someone it was only Obie and not a real fire that needed putting out.

"I'll be back," I told Obie, not that he could understand. But a promise was a promise, and I had every intention of honouring it. But next time, I was going to leave my walkie-talkie outside.

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SIX

I carried a broom into Obie's bay, hoping that this would let me sweep the bits of food I tossed in yesterday without having to enter the enclosure. The hellhound instantly hid in the corner, his tail tucked between his legs, and his teeth bared.

"Just me," I said, trying to stick the broom through the bars and realising it was too thick. So much for that plan. I would have to find a different utensil to grab the pieces, maybe one of those grabbers for garbage would do the job.

While I was pondering, I noticed that there were some pieces missing. It was too sporadic for someone to have cleaned it up, so he must've eaten them.

But which ones? It was hard to see from this distance. I needed to visit maintenance and see if they would lend me a grabber. Or...

I turned the broom around and stuck the handle through the rails.

"I'm such an idiot," I muttered as I pulled piece by piece towards me. It was painstakingly slow, and I regretted just tossing everything in without thinking it through. I was paying for it now, but that was that.

Once I retrieved all the pieces, some of which had taken on an unpleasant colour and smell, I grabbed my notebook with the list of different meats and vegetables from my bag. I also put on a glove before I picked up the pieces of meat so I could identify them.

It took a while, but I managed to narrow it down. The pieces of chicken and turkey were missing and surprisingly enough, so was the carrot.

"So not a red meat eater, huh?" I said, surprised by that revelation. Especially because his regular meal had a lot of liver and beef in it. I'd have to talk to someone to get that changed to something with more poultry.

Hopefully, that would help him put on some well-needed weight. Not just that, any animal was easier to handle when their belly was full. Even the biggest, baddest royal sphinx would allow a few belly scratches if they weren't starving.

I threw all the rest of the food away while watching Obie from the corners of my eyes.

He was still glued to the corner, putting as much distance between us as possible, but he didn't have the same hostile vibe.

Whether that was because he was getting used to my presence or people in general was hard to say.

Hopefully, the more time he spent here, the more he would become used to interactions that didn't hurt him.

And if he could understand that we meant no harm, maybe we could establish a bond.

Something made his ears flick up, and he growled. I wondered what that was about until I heard footsteps, and Jacob popped his head around the corner.

"Ah, Charlotte. Just the person I was looking for," he said.

"We've decided that we're going to sedate him to take blood samples. We could try to

manually restrain him, but he's far too strong and dangerous for that.

While he's under, we'll take advantage to give him a full check-up and trim his nails.
"

I nodded. "That makes sense."

"But the problem is that trimming, filing, or grinding the nails will cause sparks. So if you can figure out a way we can do it without causing a fire, that would be great."

"You can count on me," I said, sounding more confident than I felt. I had no idea how to do it, but I would just have to figure it out. Maybe if I made them wet or cut his nails under fire-resistant fabric, it would be fine.

Of course, it would be best if I could try it out, but if I could get close enough to Obie to test it, we wouldn't need to sedate him.

I looked up at Jacob. "How similar are Obie's nails to a firesteel? The ones you strike to start a fire when you go camping."

"Very similar, I think. I'm not sure about the exact composition. Why?"

"Testing purposes. I thought maybe I could do some experimenting."

He looked impressed. "Smart. We're sedating him at the end of the week."

That was soon but it gave me a few days to work out how to get Obie's nails cut down to a normal size that wouldn't make his paws curl up.

"Oh, who do I speak to to change his diet? I experimented a little and I think he's more into poultry than red meat," I said, hopeful that he wouldn't be mad at me for

my initiative.

"There's no hellhound keeper, so tell Gwen," he responded.

I nodded. "I was also wondering something else. Is the old phoenix habitat still empty?" I asked. "Because if it is, maybe we could move Obie there? If his bloods are fine, at least."

Jacob hummed. "That's an interesting idea, but it's not set up for canines. The soil and enrichment are all wrong. And the barriers might not be strong enough either."

"Can't we enforce those? And I was thinking it could just be temporary, mostly to stop everyone from losing their marbles from the fire alarm going off multiple times a day."

"That's true. Let me think about it and talk to some people after my other rounds." He checked his watch and nodded. "Yeah, I have to move on. But good ideas. Keep it up."

His compliment made me quietly simmer with pride. I knew my methods could be more hands-on than some other veterinarians wanted to be, but that's how I liked it. I wanted to be closely involved with whatever animal I was working with.

Even if it meant that I spent far too much time here.

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SEVEN

I dumped the contents of my bag on the kitchen table, trying not to wince at just how much of my own money I spent on firesteel rods. But it was all for a good cause because if I cut Obie's nails and accidentally set him on fire, that would be a massive issue.

So, time to experiment and find out what I was working with.

I grabbed the first firesteel rod and a regular nail cutter for dogs.

I positioned the blades over the rod and squeezed the handle as hard as I could.

Not that it did anything. While it didn't create sparks, it only made the thinnest ridge.

Obie's nails might not be as thick as this but they were pretty chunky, so that was likely not going to work.

My next attempt involved a small saw made especially for metals, but the first bit of friction created a shower of sparks. They fell onto the table and sizzled out, which was a relief and not something I thought of before.

I better not set our flat on fire.

Before I could continue, my phone lit up to signal that a new email had arrived. I grabbed it, excited to see the name of the IREMA contact on it. The email came with a single record and lots of excuses about not being able to divulge more before the

case had gone to court.

As frustrating as that was, I was glad to have something .

I was not prepared to stare at a picture of a much younger Obie when he first arrived at the private collection.

His ears were too big for his head and he looked just as scared and dazed.

My heart broke from seeing him like that and I couldn't understand how anyone saw a vulnerable animal like him and decided to put a tight collar on him and chain him up.

Poor Obie.

There wasn't any information about where he came from which was pretty telling in itself. Poachers and illegal traders didn't like paper trails so the lack of one meant he likely didn't come from another collection.

The picture was years old which meant he had spent most of his life in captivity, no doubt having a horrible time.

That made me all the more determined to make sure we could look after him properly.

He deserved to experience what it felt like to be cared for.

If only there was a way to explain that to him but there wasn't.

Jabbing him with a syringe was likely going to scare him but things had to get worse before they could get better unfortunately.

He needed these additional blood tests done before we could help him.

The same was true for his nails which was why I researched ways to cut them for the remainder of the evening.

Regular cutters didn't do the job, and a file or saw took way too long.

An electrical saw might do the trick, but all of it created lots and lots of sparks.

Soaking the firesteel in water helped a little, but even one spark could ignite Obie.

This was some impressive material, and if I ever needed to make a fire in the wild, I would totally use a firesteel. But as impressive as it was, it was frustrating too.

How was I going to cut Obie's nails without setting everything ablaze?

I grabbed the wool scarf that I got from a thrift store. It smelled funky but it was supposed to be fire resistant, so maybe if I used it to catch the sparks before they could ignite Obie, we could get somewhere.

I wrapped the firesteel rod with the scarf and grabbed the saw, only now realising that this prevented me from actually seeing where to cut. Frustrated, I grabbed the bolt cutters and cut through the wool and rod alike. Small sparks jumped up but they fell onto the scarf and sizzled out right away.

Maybe instead of covering Obie's nails, I could wrap his legs with wool to prevent them from catching fire. That wouldn't stop any of our clothing from catching fire, but that could be handled.

Yes, this could work.

The sound of the door opening made me look up, and Tamara came in with a handful of friends behind her. She looked surprised to see me and smiled as she tipped her shoes off.

I counted three friends, which was definitely three people too many for my preference.

Tamara gave me a sheepish smile. "Hey, Charlotte. Didn't realise you would be here. Planning a camping trip?"

"No, I'm trying to figure out a way to cut this firesteel without it sparking everywhere," I said, showing her the metallic rods.

"The hellhound?" she guessed.

I nodded. "You didn't tell me you had friends over. Again."

One of the men touched Tamara's waist in a way that suggested he was more than just a friend. He kissed her cheek, nodded at me as he walked past, and opened the fridge like he lived here.

The clinking of glass bottles left no doubt that they were here to drink and Tamara's friends were always rowdy. Not exactly how I wanted to spend my evening.

"Are you joining us for a drink?" Tamara asked.

"I think you know I won't." I pushed all of my things back into my bag. "I think I'll see what Felicity is up to."

"You don't have to leave."

"No, it's fine. I'm just not in the mood for a party," I said, sighing when one of her friends turned the music on loud. They were inconsiderate guests, that much was sure, but it wasn't like I could stop them. This was just the downside of having to share a flat.

Luckily, I had somewhere else to go, although the irony of being a guest in Felicity's shared accommodation didn't escape my notice.

If only I had my own space. Or maybe one I could share with just Felicity?

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EIGHT

I carried my bolt cutters and wool scarves into Quarantine, wondering what people might think I was doing with these. It was a weird combination of items for sure, like I was a granny burglar or something.

I opened the door to Obie's bay, letting out the smell of his gases before I entered. It was so potent, it could be bottled as an anti-socialising spray. It was going to be good for everyone involved when he could move out from quarantine into an open space with lots and lots of fresh air.

He was hiding in a different corner and growled when he saw me, his tail still tucked firmly between his legs.

When I saw him like this, without fire engulfing him, he looked just like a big sad dog.

One with lots of scars and red eyes, nails that definitely needed clipping, but a snout that needed love.

"How are you adjusting to life here, Obie? Had a good night's sleep?" I asked, pleased when he briefly stopped growling to look at me. That was a great sign and hopefully meant he could adjust to life around people.

Unfortunately, we had to stab him with a syringe today, but it was for his own good.

When Jacob arrived with his kit, he looked tired, but that was to be expected. He was

potentially doing more hours than me, and that was saying a lot. Obie's ears flattened, and he growled louder than before, lifting his foot like he might start scratching.

If he set himself on fire, that wouldn't be a great start, although maybe not the worst, because if he burned up his fuel now, that would mean less risk of him setting himself on fire when I started cutting his nails.

But emotionally, it was better if he didn't get so scared that he felt like he needed to protect himself.

Jacob set down his suitcase. "Morning. Ready to give our new friend a makeover?"

I nodded. "I did some testing, and I think if I can wrap his legs in wool, it might stop the sparks from catching."

"We'll have fire extinguishers on standby," he said as he prepared his syringe pole. "Now to jab him without him setting himself on fire. I think I'm going to have to go in. It would be better if we had a longer pole, but hey, we'll have to make do with the equipment we got."

"Can't we move him into one of the bays where we handle the bigger animals, like the royal sphinxes?" I asked.

"All full." He cracked his neck. "I'm just going to have to go in. It'll be fine."

"Can I do it?" I asked. I'd spent a lot of time sitting with Obie, and he didn't seem to react as strongly to me as when Jacob entered. It was a gamble, but I had a feeling I might be able to get closer to the hellhound than he might.

Jacob held out the pole. "Be my guest. Just be careful."

He closed the door first before opening the gate. It was a risky move because there was always a chance he would lunge at me. If he was just sitting a bit closer or if he was in a smaller bay with more reach, I wouldn't have to go in. But working with animals was never without risks.

It was even riskier to go down on my knees, but I didn't want to come across as a threat. Especially since I was about to stab him with something sharp.

Obie growled and kept his gaze firmly fixated on me, but didn't seem too scared. I inched closer, pole at the ready. It was a bit awkward to crawl closer, and my leg cramped, but I pushed through. I aimed the syringe at his waist, moving it as slowly as I could so as not to startle him.

He watched me, growling softly, but not moving. It was unfortunate that we didn't have a bond with Obie to make this a stress-free experience, but we just had to do it.

I pushed the syringe into him, pressing the trigger right away.

Obie jumped up from the sting and instantly scraped both his paws on the ground.

I could see the sparks fly up, but my body didn't react in time.

I just braced for the blast of heat, grimacing when it scorched the hair on my arm.

It was a good thing Obie was frightened and staying back, giving me the time to hurry out of the bay and close the gate behind me.

Jacob pulled me out into the hallway. "Are you alright? Did you get burned?"

I lifted my arm which was a bit tender and red, but that was it. "No, don't think so."

"You should get some running water on that still," he said, pointing me towards the bathroom.

"Nah, I'm fine. We've got work to do. Nails to cut, bloods to take."

"Charlotte, you need to take care of yourself."

"I'll run water over it when we're done," I promised, moving past him so I could look into the bay. As soon as the fire was out and Obie was asleep, we could move in to get what we needed.

It didn't take long for the fire to die down, and when we went back in, Obie was flopped on his side with his paws out.

Jacob put the door open all the way and wafted some air into the room. "I'm not sure I'll ever get used to this smell, whoo."

"It is lethal." I grabbed my bolt cutters from the floor and the wool scarf, carrying them into the bay.

Jacob followed behind me with his kit and wrapped a muzzle around his snout, just in case he woke up and decided to give one of us a nip.

While he shaved a patch on her front leg so he could draw blood, I wrapped Obie's back leg with the scarf.

In theory, because he had just burned up all of his sweat, there was less chance of him catching on fire again, but it didn't hurt to be cautious.

Especially because both of us were very close to Obie, and if he burst into flames, we would walk away with burns.

I positioned the cutters onto the first nail, making sure not to take too much off. I worried it wouldn't cut, but it went through with ease.

Easier than the firesteel. Maybe I didn't have to bring these massive cutters after all. Some sparks jumped up but landed safely on the wool.

What a relief. My strategy worked.

I continued on, clipping his nails while avoiding the pieces shooting through the air like little bullets. In a perfect world, we could put him in a habitat that had rocks that would naturally wear them down. Or put up some scratch pads that he could use to keep them to a healthy size.

When I was done with his hind legs, I shuffled around Jacob. "Are you done with his front legs?"

He nodded. "Go for it. I've already examined his mouth. Just want to check his heart while we're here."

I clipped the rest of his nails, pleased that we managed to get them to an acceptable size for now. That should make him feel more comfortable.

Jacob hummed when he examined some of the cuts on his body. "He won't need stitches, luckily, but some of these are nasty. Poor thing."

I took the opportunity to give Obie a little pat between his gorgeous floppy ears. It wasn't necessarily right to pet wild animals, but this one felt like he needed a little bit of love. And there was definitely no risk of him getting too attached to people. If anything, it was the opposite.

"I'm done," I announced.

Jacob nodded. "Me too, and I think our boy is starting to stir, so time to get out before we become toast."

I took the muzzle off and grabbed my bolt cutters on the way out. We were safe on the other side of the bars with the gate closed by the time Obie opened his eyes and sat back up. He looked adorably dazed and didn't instantly start growling, which was a good sign.

"Looks like he's waking up well, that's always a relief." Jacob patted the bag with blood tubes. "Alright, I'm going to get that sent off to the lab. You should run some water on your arm."

I'd already forgotten about that. My skin was just a little red, and I was missing some hair, but that was it. Mostly, I was really pleased that we managed to get Obie checked out.

If his bloods came back clean, he could move out of Quarantine and we could find him a much better home. That was all that mattered to me.

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NINE

There was a lovely breeze going through the park which meant it was full of visitors.

Good weather did that to people and while I preferred everything calm and quiet, it was also good that we were drawing guests.

Every person who came into the Griffin Sanctuary was someone we could educate and convert into an animal and environment advocate.

A group of excited children ran past me, shouting at their parents.

"Mummy! I want to pet a peryton!" a little girl exclaimed.

A boy about the same age shouted over her. "I want to ride a peryton!"

Their mother chuckled. "I don't think that's allowed, honey. We're going to have to be very calm, otherwise we'll scare them away."

I smiled at the children's attempt to contain their excitement, but they were still as bouncy as ever, just slightly less loud. I hoped they would see their perytons and fall in love with them, and maybe in a decade or so, they would be sending in their applications to work in a place like this.

Two women walked past me with cameras in their hands. They were ignoring each other and only talking to their devices, expecting others to get out of their way as they vlogged about the animals and the day.

Influencers.

I shook my head, not really getting how they could enjoy the park if they were glued to their camera, but that was their business.

I continued on, weaving through the crowds. It really was busy, which meant the unicorn viewpoint was going to be packed. It was a good thing I could go in through the side door to see my favourite animals, and my favourite person.

The Unicorn House came into sight, and I let myself in, not worrying about intruding. Nobody turned a vet away, even if I was just an apprentice.

I almost ran into Nissan, who was carrying an empty bucket out. He looked up when he saw me, surprise jumping to his face. "Look who it is! Missing the unicorns, huh? How are you?"

"I always miss the unicorns," I said, smiling when I could see the herd grazing in their meadow.

A tickling laugh came from behind me. "And here I thought you came to see me."

I turned around, my grin lifting when I saw Felicity. She looked worn and sweaty from a hard day's work, but that just made her all the more beautiful to me. That was what dedication looked like.

She came round to me, touching my waist. "Hey, you. Are you here on business or to see me?"

"Both. But mostly business. I hear someone got bitten in the butt," I said, not at all surprised by the development. Something would have to be done before Criss seriously hurt someone.

Felicity smiled and touched my waist. "I'll escort you."

"Escort me? Fancy," I teased, happily following her into the paddock so we could isolate the meeker twin and get him into a stable for a bit of disinfecting.

We approached the herd and The Sergeant bristled in our direction, letting us know he had seen us.

I held up my hands. "Just me. We've done this dance before."

He blew a breath in my direction and turned his back to me, a gesture that made it clear he accepted me as part of his family. It was only right considering I spent months feeding them and cleaning up their poop.

"You're looking well, Sergeant. Keep up the exercise."

Felicity handed me a purple carrot and clicked her tongue. "Cross, come here, boy."

The young colt ignored us, but we got Candle's attention. She trotted over to us, her coat shimmering in the sun. She looked absolutely gorgeous, much like her mother who was keeping half an eye on her.

"This carrot is not for you, I'm afraid," I said, hiding it behind me and putting it in my back pocket.

She didn't care and almost bumped into me, clearly looking for a treat even though they had breakfast not that long ago.

I stepped towards Cross, hoping to get his attention. It would've been easier if I came for a checkup in the early morning before they left for their daily graze but there was always so much to do, I got here when I got here.

"Incoming," Felicity warned.

I looked up in time to see Criss trotting over, his gaze focused on Candle. He was clearly curious about what was happening. Or perhaps he was jealous that something was drawing her attention that wasn't him.

Not in the mood to deal with a cocky colt, I deflected him by holding out my hand and pushing his head to the side. He bristled as he waltzed past, clearly not impressed by being kept out of the party.

I ignored all the other unicorns, my only focus on Cross who was isolating himself from the herd. It was clearly no longer a safe space for him and it was making my heart ache. Poor guy.

I held out the purple carrot to him when a bolt of pain stung my bum. I shrieked and turned around, coming face to face with an angry Criss.

"Hey!" I shouted, clapping my hand to scare the colt away. That really hurt.

Felicity hurried over to me, concern etched into her features. "Oh my goodness, are you alright?"

"Yeah, but ouch. He bit me."

"I saw that. Naughty Criss."

I rubbed the cheek he bit, grimacing at how tender it felt. I didn't think he broke the skin but I wouldn't be surprised if it left a bruise. First, an almost-burn, now a unicorn-teeth-shaped bruise. Working with animals was a dangerous job, that was for sure.

"You should get that checked out," Felicity said, protectively stepping in front of me to block a curious Candle from getting to me.

"I'm fine, it's not like a nurse can do much for me. I'll throw some alcohol on it and call it done."

She raised one eyebrow at me. "Alcohol you use on animals?"

"Alcohol is alcohol," I said with a shrug, grimacing when my bum actually throbbed quite a bit. I didn't know if Criss meant to hurt me or if he thought the carrot had still been in my pocket, but it wasn't exactly nice.

At least now I'd be able to relate to Cross easily. We managed to isolate him from the herd, and luckily, his bite didn't need stitches. Just some disinfectant would sort out me and him.

But next time, I would definitely be more careful around Criss.

TEN

I yawned when I entered the meeting room, drawn in by the smell of coffee. It was far too early, and yesterday I had got home far too late, but that was just life doing a passion job.

I wouldn't do these kinds of hours for a job that I hated.

The headkeeper Gwen was already in the room sipping her coffee and looking like she could fall asleep at any point.

I smiled at her when I sat down, instantly regretting my decision.

My bum was actually sore from Criss' bite, not that I could tell anyone.

It was embarrassing enough that I'd been bitten there, I didn't want to broadcast it.

I kept to myself, not minding the silence. It was actually very welcome considering how loud Tamara's friends had been last night. I wasn't sure why she was suddenly such a social butterfly but it was getting old fast.

It took Gwen a few minutes to realise I sat down. She ran a hand through her wild curls and yawned. "Did I say hello?"

"No, but that's okay. It's early."

"Tell me about it. I was up all night. Frustrating phone calls with IREMA."

I frowned. "What do they want?"

"Oh, they're claiming there's an issue with the paperwork for the simurgh"

"Simurgh," I repeated, not sure I knew what animal she was talking about.

"They're winged creatures. There was one in the private collection, didn't you see it?"

"No."

"That's a shame, they're gorgeous but enormous. We didn't have the ability to take custody of it, so it was transported to Myth&Monster right away, but now IREMA is kicking up a fuss."

I did not envy her for having to deal with this, and while I understood the need for regulations, especially for international cooperations, it was ironic that IREMA's influence was taking her time away from looking after the animals. The very thing they claimed to be most concerned about.

The conversation came to a halt when a few more people came in, including Jacob. He clapped his hands to silence the room and positioned himself at the front.

"Good morning, everyone. I know it's early, or late for some of you, so I'll keep it brief.

Blood results for our hellhound came in, and they're satisfactory. The results of the last fecal sample was also fine, no parasites or anything, so he's in the clear.

Which means we can move him out of Quarantine. "

A collective sigh of relief filled the room.

"Thank goodness for that," one of the nurses muttered. "Those fire alarms are driving me up the walls. I'm even dreaming of them."

Someone raised their hand. "Where are we moving him?"

"We're still figuring that out," Gwen replied, hiding a yawn. "I've been talking to the Cryptic Conservation, who have a different type of hellhound that's fairly similar. They're wondering if we could merge him with that pack."

"So we're not keeping him?" I asked, not sure if I was disappointed by that or not. There was something so pitiful about Obie, it was really triggering that desire to look after him.

In many ways, he just looked like a really big puppy. One that caught on fire, but that was just details.

Gwen didn't look so sure. "It depends on whether we can get him settled and if he'll be lonely on his own.

Not a huge amount is known about them, so we're not sure if they usually roam around in packs, like wolves and lupins, or if they're a solitary animal.

For now, we'll move him into the old phoenix habitat. "

Oh, that had been my suggestion.

I wondered if Jacob had relayed it or if they'd come to the same conclusion. It didn't really matter, I was just pleased that they thought it was a good idea too.

Jacob looked at me. "Charlotte, you've been spending a fair amount with Obie, haven't you? How about you look after him during and after the move? Because he's

in really bad condition."

"Yeah, sure. Am I assisting you?" I asked, pleased that I'd be spending more time with Obie. I was invested now, and I wanted to see him nice and healthy.

My mentor smiled. "I've got a lot on my plate at the moment so I'll be mostly hands-off. If you could take charge of his care, that would help out a lot."

Surprise sprang up in me. That was a huge responsibility, and I hadn't worked a case entirely on my own yet. Not that I wasn't up for it, I knew working independently was the goal of our training. I just hadn't expected to be tasked with my first solo case yet.

But I was ready for it.

I nodded, grinning from ear to ear. "I'm on it."

"Wonderful. If you run into an issue, you can always come to me for help, but for now, I'll leave it in your hands."

He continued his briefing, but I didn't hear anything else, I was too pleased and excited with my current assignment. I knew we were short-staffed, but Jacob wouldn't have entrusted this to me if he didn't think I was up for it.

I was going to do everything I could to prove that I could handle this.

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ELEVEN

My stomach was roaring by the time I got to the canteen, and I felt a little lightheaded which was not actually great. It was a bit ironic that my job was to take care of animals, but I didn't manage to do that for myself.

I made my way through the tables towards the food line and felt weird prickling in the back of my head, like people were paying extra attention to me.

Was it just my imagination, or did I smell? I didn't think anyone had peed on me today, but who knew if I stepped into something questionable during my rounds.

I got to the front, grabbed a tray, and ordered some food.

Everything looked really good, and I was craving carbs, so I got fries that looked golden and delightfully greasy and a big slice of lasagne to go with it.

The wonderful aroma made my stomach rumble even louder, and I was glad that I quickly spotted Felicity, so I didn't have to waste time looking for her.

She looked up from her phone when she heard me coming, but had a weird smile on her face. "Hey, Char."

I set my tray down so I didn't drop it before leaning over to kiss her. "Hi. I'm starving."

"When's the last time you ate?"

"Breakfast." I didn't wait and stuffed some of the fries in my mouth. They were salty with just enough crisp and so satisfying. That hit the spot.

Felicity hummed. "Right. That's really not okay, but that's a problem for later. Have you been on your phone?"

"Not really. If I had a break to be on my phone, I would've eaten."

"I thought as much." She grabbed hers from her tray and pushed it my way. "Look at this."

There was a strange tone to her voice that made me put down my fork so I could focus. Her phone was queued up with a video, which wasn't unusual, we shared funny videos all the time.

"Unicorn bites girl's butt, #animalfails," I read, dread replacing the hunger in my stomach. "Oh no."

I hit play, and the video started, bringing up the very familiar sight of the unicorn herd from one of our viewpoints. The quality was pretty bad because it was so zoomed in, but I recognised myself and Felicity when we entered the habitat.

I wasn't sure why I kept watching, I knew what happened. And yet, I was glued to the video that captured the unicorns swarming us, the little disagreement between the colts, and Criss trotting up to me for the treat.

"Look at his face," I pointed out, tapping the screen to pause. "His eyes are so wide, and his lips are pulled up. That's such an aggressive look."

Felicity nodded. "Criss has been so naughty recently. No, you know what, it's not fair to call him naughty. In the wild, this is exactly the kind of behaviour you'd want to

see from a subadult male. He's challenging boundaries, getting possessive over the ladies."

"It's giving leader of the pack material," I added.

"For sure. If he got too daring and annoying, the Sergeant would kick him out, and Criss would start a herd of his own where he can flirt with the ladies as much as he wants." She sighed. "In here, he's just not got the freedom to display those behaviours."

I nodded and pressed play again, even though I knew exactly what was going to happen. It was just one of those morbid curiosities that I couldn't contain.

I grimaced when Criss made his attack, and my bruised bum cheek throbbed when I watched him bite me with his big teeth.

"Ouch. No wonder it hurts when I sit," I muttered.

"Does it still hurt?"

"Yes, of course. Didn't you see how hard he bit me?" I asked, pointing at the video.

Felicity gave me a pity smile. "Yeah, it did look brutal."

"It was. Absolutely brutal."

"You know, if it still hurts tonight, I can kiss it better," she said with a cute wink.

That made me laugh. "I'm up for that, if I'm not too tired. I'm looking after Obie, the hellhound. I'm actually kind of in charge of his care," I announced, grinning with pride.

"Oh, really?" Felicity's smile grew into a real one. "That's amazing. I mean, you deserve it. You've worked so hard in the past months."

"I have. I've run myself ragged for this place," I said, sighing when I thought about just how many hours and energy I had put into this job. It was worth it, but that didn't stop it from being more exhausting than anything.

And now I was in one of those fail videos online.

"How many people have seen this?" I asked, scrolling down to the stats of the video. "Fifty thousand people?"

"You know, considering internet stats, that's really not a huge amount. That's not even semi-viral," Felicity said with a reassuring grin that was entirely unconvincing.

"You saw it. How did you come across this? Just from swiping, or did someone send it to you?"

"Just showed up in my feed," she admitted. "But! But, I'm subscribed to this channel because... well, I find these kinds of fail videos funny. I mean, not the ones where people get seriously hurt obviously."

I glared at her. "And you don't think Criss biting my butt hurt?"

She pulled a face. "Sorry."

"It's fine." I tapped the video again, replaying it to torture myself.

At least my face wasn't hugely recognisable.

Or at least, not to anyone who didn't know me.

It was frustrating that the Griffin Sanctuary was tagged in the description but it wasn't like viewers actually cared about the people in the videos.

They just wanted a quick laugh and then would've forgotten all about it within five seconds when they scrolled to the next video.

At least, I hoped that would be the case with this video.

TWELVE

I stopped at the vending machine and paid way more money for a drink and an energy bar than I would in a store, but there was no store in the veterinary clinic. There was a vending machine, so it was this or no sugar for me.

The can fell down with a loud clank, followed by the dull plop of the bar. Should I go home since my shift was at its end and get a proper dinner? Of course, but I had a date with a hellhound and I didn't want to keep him waiting.

I made my way towards Quarantine, going through all the processes to put on protective gear so I didn't track dirt into here or worse, carried a disease out of here.

All of the bays I passed were full, which was normal since the private collection was unearthed, but had definitely not been the case before that.

It couldn't be a very relaxing place for an animal as scared as Obie, so moving him would be much better but we couldn't do that until he wasn't so scared.

What a catch twenty-two.

Hopefully, my plans for today would help set him at ease because I came with a pocketful of treats. Maybe I should've spent the money on snacks for myself, but I hadn't thought of that until now. And it wasn't like the pet store had human treats anyway.

I reached Obie's bay and opened the door, not making the mistake of going in straight

away. I was prepared for the smell, but not used to it yet. Maybe I would never be used to it because it was harsh and potent and felt like it could burn the hair in my nostrils if I breathed in too deep.

Once the odour had dissipated, I went inside, not at all surprised to find the hellhound hiding in the corner. He looked up when he saw me and his tail instantly went between his legs where it quivered slightly. He growled and pressed himself into as small a ball as possible.

"Fair enough. Last time I was here, I did jab you with a needle," I said, feeling pretty guilty about that. "But I'm not going to hurt you today."

He kept growling, which wasn't a surprise. He likely didn't understand a word of what I was saying, unlike some animals who were surprisingly clever and capable.

Still, it would be good to get him used to my voice. Or just sounds in general.

"So I watched a lot of training videos on how to work with anxious dogs," I said, settling down against the wall furthest away from him. "And one of them said that just sitting in silence is better than trying to engage you. So that's what I'm going to do."

It sounded boring, but luckily, I had my phone and my snack. That would just keep me plenty entertained while I hopefully got Obie used to my presence enough that he'd at least stop hiding in the corner.

I watched short videos without really paying attention to them. Instead, I kept an eye on Obie, who was still glued to the same spot. But maybe he looked a little bit more relaxed. Or less tense at least.

That was a step in the right direction.

That confirmed this was the right decision. I just had to keep it up and hope he would get used to me before I ran out of videos. And before my bum went numb from sitting on the floor.

Another animal fail video came up, one of a royal sphinx lunging at a small boy and hitting his face against the glass.

The boy burst into tears while the sphinx slunk away, clearly dazed and embarrassed.

I didn't particularly think this was funny, but the comment section seemed to find it hilarious.

I didn't recognise the habitat, which meant it wasn't taken in the Griffin Sanctuary.

Still, I didn't like this rising trend of putting mythical animals on social media.

Especially not when lots and lots of comments were discussing the health of the royal sphinx, the habitat, and giving critiques about keeping them in captivity without clearly understanding why.

It was like they never even heard about the wildfire that destroyed their entire habitat.

I clicked away from the videos and read some articles about personal drama instead when movement caught my eye. It was Obie, flopping down on his belly. He rested his head down on his front legs, and it made his mouth squish together, which instantly took him from ferocious to adorable.

A rush of excitement vibrated through me, but I didn't dare move or kick my feet or jump for joy. Instead, I screamed soundlessly and grabbed my phone so I could take a picture to commemorate this moment.

Obie was relaxing! This felt like a massive victory.

I sent the picture to Felicity right away. Look!!

Her response came right away. Awww, he's so cute. Is he asleep?

I glanced at the hellhound who was giving me the side-eye. He was no longer on high alert, but calling him comfortable would be too much.

No, he's still looking at me. But this is a big win considering he would cower and growl.

I took a few more pictures, excited about this development. It was only a small step, and we were miles away from handling him, but this proved that progress was possible.

THIRTEEN

Multiple days passed and I used all my free time to keep Obie company. It wasn't particularly interesting to sit with a hellhound who barely moved but I knew this was the only way.

Gradually, he got used to my presence. He still set off the fire alarm when he heard a loud noise or refused to eat with anyone present.

It took almost two weeks before he stopped growling when I entered the room and sometimes, he even closed his eyes when he was resting.

Not for very long, and he never dozed off, but I counted it as a massive win.

He was also slowly putting on weight now that his diet contained chicken and root vegetables which was wonderful to see. His coat was becoming shinier and he didn't look like he would shatter if he fell.

One thing that was less ideal was that his nails had almost grown back to their old size but there was no way to trim them without putting him under.

I'd have to find a way to manage that without anaesthetic because it just wasn't a feasible solution.

We had to be able to manage his welfare without sedating him regularly.

And that meant getting him used to my presence and pushing his boundaries, even if

it might destroy all the progress I made so far.

It was late when I entered his bay and Quarantine was relatively quiet which was as good a time as any.

Obie looked up from his spot in the corner, his ears rising in what I'd come to understand was curiosity.

"Just me," I announced, pausing in front of him. I set my bag down so I could grab the assortment of treats I brought with me today.

I was sure some people would hate the idea of training a wild and mythical animal like Obie, and under different circumstances, I wouldn't risk him getting too attached to humans and developing behaviours that were only useful in captivity.

But considering that he would likely never be able to return to the wild, this was his best option. If he was going to stay in captivity, he needed to adapt to survive.

"I've brought more treats for you," I said, reaching for the bag of the latest goodies I was trying out. I was doing it more systematically this time and bringing one treat every day instead of throwing all sorts at him.

Obie gave me what felt like a judgemental look.

"So for today's snack, I've got some freeze dried chicken." I held up the little cube between my fingers and gave it a squish. "Look, they're soft in texture. Isn't that fun?"

Obie's nose wobbled.

"Oh, oh, I sense interest."

I tossed the cube in and it bounced towards him, eventually bumping against his front paw. His ears went up ever so slightly and he gave it a sniff which was more interest than he'd ever shown for any food I offered him before.

He didn't eat it though. Instead, he crossed his paws, gave me a look that was definitely judgemental, and closed his eyes.

"So now you're ignoring me? That's a bit rude."

Obie let out a deep troubled sigh. It really felt like he was communicating with me in some way. Or maybe I was putting too much meaning on his silence. In any way, I considered this massive progress.

I sat down in my corner and got my phone out to message Felicity. She'd been very understanding about me spending a lot of time with Obie but I knew she was missing me and running out of patience.

If only I didn't have to choose between my love life and the animals I cared for far too much. If only I could combine the two...

I looked up at Obie. "Do you think you'd be up for another visitor? Or would two people in here be too much? Then again, it's probably good practice for you."

He opened one eye, closed it, and went right back to ignoring me.

"I'm going to take that as a yes," I said, typing out an invite to Felicity.

Maybe date night in Quarantine wasn't exactly the height of romance but this was the reality of our life. Not everything was all sunshine and roses, sometimes it was unicorn poop and sick animals.

It didn't take long for Felicity to arrive with a box of pizza and a smile that took some of my tiredness away. Obie sat up when she came in and pulled his lips up but didn't resort to a full growl.

That was so much better than him bursting into flames at the lightest of sounds.

She chuckled and waved at Obie which he didn't seem too pleased about. "Hi, Obie. Are you bored of Charlotte yet?"

I scoffed. "Oi!"

Obie growled at the sudden sound but Felicity didn't seem fazed in the slightest. She was like that with the unicorns too, never flustered, never overwhelmed, always in control. I admired that about her.

"So this is where you've been hanging out all the time," Felicity said with that teasing grin of hers.

"Yeah, yeah, welcome to my humble abode," I said, gesturing around. "There are no windows, no bathrooms, and we'll have to sit on the floor. But the rent is pretty cheap and there's an adorable hellhound here."

Felicity chuckled as she leaned in to kiss me. "Wow, beautiful. When can I move in?"

"You? Anytime." I took the pizza box from her so she could sit down and flipped the lid before I handed it back. "Yum, pepperoni."

"You know I love a good pepperoni," she said, shuffling so she could lean against the wall. "Oh, and it looks like your hellhound might want some as well."

"Ha ha," I snarked before looking at Obie and realising his ears were up and his nose

was wobbling. "Wait, stop, pause. He actually looks interested."

"I know, that's why I said it," Felicity remarked. "What?"

"I've been trying to find a treat he likes for the last two weeks and this is the biggest reaction I've seen from him," I explained, my gaze going to the rounds of pepperoni.

There were little pools of oil in them and they were so processed, they weren't exactly a healthy thing to eat.

I couldn't feed that to one of our animals.

Could I?

I grabbed one of the rounds and tossed it into his enclosure, deciding that one piece wasn't going to harm him. He gobbled it off the floor like it had never been there. Then gave me the most expressive look I'd seen from him since, the one every dog owner knew was irresistible. The begging eyes.

"Really? I bought you so many types of treats and you like pepperoni ?" I asked, shaking my head at the realisation. How did a hellhound even acquire a taste for that? It wasn't like pepperoni grew in the wild.

Someone had to have given them to him when he was younger and maybe it was one of the only things he associated with good times.

Felicity grabbed a piece of pizza. "You can do with your side what you want but you're not feeding him my pepperoni."

She knew me so well.

My stomach grumbled and I got myself a slice. I took a big bite out of it and threw another piece towards Obie which he ate instantly. Finally, I found something that he enjoyed.

This piece of pepperoni was going to be the gateway to getting him adjusted to life at the Griffin Sanctuary.

FOURTEEN

I arrived at Obie's bay rested and with a new plan and that plan was pepperoni.

It wasn't exactly something that could be a permanent staple in his diet but since he needed to gain some pounds and this was the only thing that got a reaction, it was worth it.

And since his digestive system was quite robust, it shouldn't do him the same harm as it would to a regular dog.

Obie was asleep in his fluffy bed for once and opened his eyes when he saw me but remained where he was, a really good sign that he was feeling more relaxed.

"Good morning, big guy," I said, realising I also felt a lot more at ease around him. "Look what I brought. A treat that's terrible for your health. I don't even really know what pepperoni is made of."

He gave me a look that implied he didn't either.

I turned the packet over to read the ingredients. "Pork, pork fat, salt. Oof, that's a lot of salt. Some flavourings and spices. Oh, and no artificial ingredients or preservatives. Not bad, not bad."

He crossed his front legs and tilted his head in a way that was so doglike, it was adorable. He flinched at the harsh sound of me opening the packet of pepperoni but perked up when the slightly salty smell rose up in the air.

"Oh, you like that, huh?"

I rolled one of the slices of pepperoni and tossed it towards him. It unfurled mid-air and landed with a plop in front of him. He gave it a tentative sniff, an inquisitive lick, and left it where it was.

"I swear, if it has to be cooked pepperoni---" I threatened, relieved when he ate it after all. "That's better."

He licked his lips and sniffed the ground, like he was looking for more. I grabbed another slice which made the packet crinkle. This time, Obie looked up expectantly.

"You want another piece?" I asked, waving it through the air.

His gaze followed it and this excited giddy feeling spread through me. He was reacting to something I did, a positive reaction as well. These were the very first steps towards forming a genuine connection, something I was looking very, very forward to.

I kept throwing him pieces of pepperoni, amazed by how fast he gobbled them up. Something about it was really jiving with him because he was really going for it.

"You're a strange creature. I'd love to know who developed your taste for pepperoni."

Obie looked at me with those big red eyes of his, a pleading look. With his soft fluffy ears and his adorable face, and no fire that could burn down a forest, he didn't deserve to be called a hellhound. He was far too cute for that.

I tossed him the next piece of pepperoni, deliberately making it land in the middle of his enclosure. If he wanted it, he would have to crawl closer. And if I could get him to follow a trail of pepperoni into a moveable crate, we could finally get him out of

Quarantine.

He stared at the slice, then at me, then back at the slice. It was hard to read his expression but he looked confused. Or maybe even a little judgemental.

"You've got to work for it," I said, shrugging as I crouched down. I was quietly begging him to shuffle forward. Just a little bit. I didn't feel like I was asking for much, it wasn't like I was trying to feed him by hand.

Obie let out a puff of air, tried to reach the pepperoni by stretching his neck, and sniffed that sweet pepperoni air. He lipped the edge, not quite managing to reach it.

"Just a little more," I whispered, quietly encouraging him.

After what felt like the longest second in my life, Obie got up from his position, took the two steps to eat the pepperoni, and returned to his corner.

Victory!

I pumped my fist to celebrate and accidentally dropped the other packages. They clattered on the floor and startled Obie. He scraped his paw over the floor and the sparks flew up into his fur where they caught on fire.

Damn it. Just when I was making progress.

I vacated the room, frustrated at myself for messing up such an important moment. If I hadn't spooked him, who knew how much progress we could've made. The loud fire alarm only underlined my disappointment.

One of the permanent staff stuck their head out of their office, their frustrated expression directed at me. "Hellhound?"

"Hellhound," I confirmed.

He nodded. "Figures. I can't wait for him to get out of here."

"I'm working on it," I said, finally able to think when the blaring alarm stopped. I couldn't blame the others for being fed up with it but it wasn't like poor Obie was trying to be a bother on purpose.

He probably didn't like the loud alarms either.

I stayed outside of the room, unable to do anything but wait for him to burn up all his sweat. I had no idea what it did to the oxygen levels in the room but Obie didn't seem bothered by it so that was something at least.

He looked so sad pacing nervously while flames engulfed him and I wanted to give him a hug to let him know everything was going to be alright. Somehow.

Maria came out from an adjacent room and waved when she saw me. "Hellhound?"

I nodded. "Hellhound," I confirmed again.

"He's proving quite a challenge." She paused in front of me. "Making pizza?"

"Sorry?"

She pointed at the half-empty package of pepperoni in my hands. "You making pizza?"

"Oh, no. This is the only food that Obie seems interested in. I know it's not very good for him but being in Quarantine isn't good for him either."

Maria chuckled. "I totally understand. It's like pregnancy cravings. What's good for someone in the long run and short run are two very different things but sometimes, to make it to the long run, we need to make compromises in the short term."

Relief washed over me that she understood and that I wasn't some horrible person and caretaker for feeding Obie salty processed meats.

Her walkie-talkie crackled and she shot me an apologetic look that meant she was done socialising and had some pressing matters to take care of. I moved out of the way and checked if Obie was burned out yet.

I had work to do.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:25 pm

FIFTEEN

The sun was out and the park was full of people on a day trip out. Parents with strollers, loud teens who took up the whole path, a handful of elders out for a nice walk, and of course, the dreaded influencers.

I didn't know if it was my imagination or if there were more people with cameras than usual, but I was avoiding them like the plague.

I did not want to go viral again, especially because that one video of me had become a staple in compilations.

There were even a few remixes with funny music and parodies out there.

How embarrassing.

I reached the old phoenix habitat and made my way in, pleased to see that significant changes had been made so far.

Some of the trees and bushes had been removed and replaced with big boulders and rocky terrain which was supposed to mimic the hellhound's volcanic and barren habitat.

The fence had been reinforced and was now suitable for a large mammal which was the most important change.

We couldn't have Obie escaping and running around the Sanctuary while on fire.

That would be a disaster worth going viral.

The workmen nodded when they saw me and continued on with their backbreaking job.

"How long before the enclosure is ready?" I asked the person closest to me.

"We're finishing up by the end of the week," he responded as he wiped the sweat off of his forehead. "We've got more boulders and gravel to bring in. And we still need to dig up those trees over there."

"They can't stay?"

He set his hands on his hips. "Gwen said to get rid of most of the vegetation. Just following instructions."

"Oh, I'm not trying to critique. I was just curious. It looks great, I think Obie is going to be very happy here."

The workman grunted and went off to continue his job, leaving me just admiring the new habitat.

I knew they said this was a temporary solution while we figured out if there was a pack for Obie to join but I quietly hoped he would stay with us for a good while.

I'd gotten quite attached to the hellhound and would love to keep growing that bond.

If the habitat would be ready by the end of the week, that meant I had a few more days to get Obie used to his transportation crate.

I had no illusions that the experience would still be stressful.

There was almost zero chance that he wouldn't combust but we could complete the actual move once he was all burned out.

But if I could make some parts of it easier, like getting him to enter the crate willingly instead of having to chase him into it, that would be something at least.

I looked at the Phoenix House one more time, smiling when I thought of my time with Apollo and Erinna, of Fakenix, and of waiting days to watch the little phoenix chick hatch.

It felt like so long ago and I'd been so green behind my ears, not knowing what or how to handle the fiery birds.

I never could've imagined that I'd have worked with so many different animals by now, and strangely, I had the private collection to thank for that experience.

Not that I was actually grateful to them.

I would happily trade everything I learned and the animals I met if it meant the private collection never existed.

But since that wasn't possible, it was better to find the positives in what had happened.

I'd learned a lot, a bunch of animals were being treated and given the care they deserved, and punishment would soon rain down on the owners.

That would be a good day.

I left the Phoenix House and almost ran into Jacob. He was on the phone and gestured for me to wait for a moment, which I did. I didn't know who he was talking to but he

looked stressed and that was never a good sign

He hummed a few times and nodded. "I can tomorrow. Noon? No problem. Yeah, okay, see you then. Yeah, bye, bye."

I waited until his call was definitely over before I spoke. "Everything alright?"

"Lawyers from IREMA. They want me to be an expert witness for the private collection case so I'm meeting with them tomorrow."

"When's the court hearing?" I asked, pleased to hear progress was finally being made.

"The date is still up in the air. I can't pretend to understand how it all works but with a case this big, it can apparently take a long time to create the case and even longer before a verdict is reached."

"Because it's such a big crime?"

"The jury will have to go through a lot of evidence to determine just how much damage they inflicted and how much they should be fined." He scratched the back of his head. "It could take months if not years."

"That's ridiculous. Can't they just seize all their assets, put them in jail and throw away the key, and call it done?" I blurted out.

He chuckled. "As appealing as that sounds, it's not that easy. But don't worry, they'll get what they deserve. I'll make sure of it."

"I wish I could help too. Do they need more people to testify or something?"

"I don't believe so. The best thing you can do to help is look after the animals. That's

where your talents lie. How are things with Obie?"

"He's making progress. He's no longer as skittish or easily scared. I've found something he likes to eat and he's not setting the fire alarm off daily anymore. That being said, I think it'll be really good to move him into a bigger enclosure. I think he could use the freedom and stimulation."

Jacob looked impressed. "That's good to hear." He checked his phone and hummed. "I've got to run, I've got a meeting with the directors and the board. It was good to check in!"

I waved as he ran off. At least none of my mentors and bosses were slacking off when I was putting in those long, long hours. That would be unbearable and unmotivating. I wouldn't do it if they weren't working so hard.

Maybe I would, if it was for the animal's benefit. But I wouldn't like it this much.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:25 pm

SIXTEEN

To prepare for moving day, I got the transport crate moved into Obie's bay so he could get used to it. And we could practice him running into it by himself. Maybe the fluffy bed inside it would be tempting.

Unfortunately, he seemed terrified of the crate and had been staying as far away from it as possible. Not even a whole packet of pepperoni was enough to tempt him into it.

"You got bad memories associated with these?"

"I guessed, sighing at the realisation.

That wasn't going to make my job any easier and unfortunately, there was no other way we could move a hellhound than put him in a crate.

I supposed we could sedate him again but not enough time had passed for it to be a good choice.

All of this effort and work would be a waste if we accidentally caused his death with too many drugs.

No, the crate had to work.

"Come on, Obie. Please go in the crate," I encouraged him, dangling some pepperoni in an attempt to tempt him.

Obie was not tempted and stayed with his tail tucked between his legs. If he wouldn't go into the crate voluntarily, we were going to have to push him in and that option didn't seem appealing to me at all. It would cause so much stress and make moving him next time even harder.

I dropped a slice of pepperoni just on the other side of the fence and he came over to eat it with wary eyes that never left mine. I took it as a compliment that I was less scary than the crate.

Encouraged by my small success, I made a trail of pepperoni towards the crate.

Obie sniffled along the floor and hoovered up every slice but didn't go into the crate.

Instead, he sat down and gave me the most expectant look.

Head cocked to the side, his floppy ears slightly up, and his nose still wobbling.

There was a small piece of white fat stuck on his snout and he lapped it away with his long pink tongue.

He kept sniffing the air, clearly seeking out more pepperoni.

"If you want another piece, go into the crate," I said, gesturing at it. "Look, it's perfectly safe and it won't hurt you."

Obie wrapped his tail around his legs and looked away, distracted by a noise in the hallway. Or he was ignoring me.

"I'm talking to you," I reminded him, not that he seemed to be listening. Something interesting was happening outside apparently.

Too curious for my own good, I went out to investigate. There was some shouting and I saw Maria run at the end of the hall which was never a good sign. That meant there was likely some emergency related to a pregnant animal or a newborn.

Since it had nothing to do with me, I went back into the enclosure with Obie, gasping when I realised he was sniffing the transport crate. Only his nose was stuck in but it was closer than he'd been before.

I stayed as quiet as I could, not wanting to interrupt his exploration. This was such a good sign and so typical that he tried it when I turned my back. It didn't matter to me. If we had to leave him alone with some pepperoni to get him in the crate, that would be exactly what we did.

I decided that he clearly needed more time to get used to the transport crate so I left him to it since it was lunchtime and I was starving.

With a grumbling stomach, I left Quarantine and made my way to the main building while texting Felicity so we could meet up. She replied right away to let me know she was already there which put a little extra bounce in my step.

It was always a good day when our breaks lined up. And to make my day even better, they were serving my favourite beef stew in the canteen.

Not a bad day so far. Not a bad day at all.

After we ate and caught up on how our day had been so far, messages appeared on Felicity's phone from our friend Ramona.

Felicity leaned against me. "Ramona wants to video call. You up for it?"

I nodded and made sure to wipe my mouth, just in case I had anything stuck around

it. With all of our busy schedules, it had been a while since we met up with our friend so it was great that we could keep in contact online.

Felicity tapped the call button and seconds later, a video of Ramona popped up. Some of her curls didn't make it into the frame but she looked happy and energetic.

"Hi, guys! She waved with both hands. "So good to catch you. It's been a while. How's life in the Griffin Sanctuary?"

I shuffled a little closer to Felicity so we were both in the screen. "Hectic. We've been absolutely swamped."

Felicity chuckled and swung her arm around me. "Charlotte has been so busy, she's lucky I still recognise her face."

"Oi!" I jabbed her lovingly, causing her to snicker. She was so cute, I never thought I'd find someone who could make me smile just because they were smiling.

"Is it so busy still because of the private collection?" Ramona asked, leaning a little closer to the screen.

"It is. Anyway, how are you?" I asked, realising that our friend didn't call to watch us be cute.

Ramona shrugged. "Not too bad, not too bad. I'm dating someone."

"Ooooh." Felicity clapped her hands. "Someone good? What's his name?"

"Actually, their name is Rock." Ramona let out a chuckle. "And shame on you for assuming." Luckily, she didn't sound insulted and said the last bit in a good-natured way.

I snorted. "Fair, fair. That's awesome news. How did you meet?"

"They work at my local butcher, the one we get a lot of meat from for our wolves.

It's not an exaggeration when I tell you they're the most beautiful person I've ever met in my life.

Oh my goodness, their eyes. I melt every time I look into them.

" Ramona fanned herself and squealed. "I'm so happy, guys. I can't wait for you to meet them."

Felicity gave me an adoring look before she turned her attention back to our friend. "I'm so pleased for you. How's life at the wolf sanctuary?"

"I'm loving it. I'm finally making progress with the pack. Yesterday, one of our she-wolves had cubs and I'm not joking, I think I died when I saw the fluffy pups. They were so tiny and the most adorable thing I've ever seen."

I felt myself smile. It was great to hear Ramona in her element, especially since having been cut from the Griffin Sanctuary program had been a real blow.

"Speaking of wolves, I'm currently looking after a hellhound," I said, hoping to pick her brain. "I'm trying to get him to go into our transport crate but he seems scared. Any tips?"

Ramona hummed. "I guess you could try treats to calm him down?"

"Don't talk to me about treats. You have no idea how much money I've spent on pepperoni."

"Pepperoni for a hellhound?"

"I know, I know. It's the only thing he seems to like. I don't know if it's the flavour or if he's got good memories of it."

She laughed. "That's an interesting thing for him to like but hey, I have a wolf that absolutely loves watermelon. Anyway, covering their eyes or the crate can help them stay calm."

"So this hellhound can set itself on fire, so I'm not sure putting more flammable material on him is a good idea. I suppose I could knit a woolen blanket."

Felicity laughed. "Do you know how long it would take you to knit a whole blanket?"

"A few days?" I guessed.

"Try months."

"Nevermind."

Ramona's laugh came through the speaker. "Make sure they're not hungry. Fed wolves are sleepy wolves."

That was a good tip and I would make sure to relay that information to Gwen or whoever had been feeding him daily. That way, they could prepare for the end of the week which was quickly coming near.

SEVENTEEN

Soaking wet from the heavy rain, I made my way into Quarantine for Obie's move. As far as weather went, this was not bad while we were moving an animal that could catch on fire. If he did combust, at least we wouldn't have to worry about the sanctuary going up in flames.

Whether the rain would present issues in another way, that was left to be seen.

There was a cart outside of Obie's bay and a small group of people who were talking a little too loud for my liking. I had no doubt that all this ruckus was already putting the hellhound on edge.

I glanced in through the window to check on him, not surprised that he was hiding in his corner. Poor Obie. He just needed to hold on a little longer and he'd have a lovely large habitat to sniff, run around in, and pee to his heart's content.

I joined the group, giving them a polite smile. "Hi."

They gave me a nod in acknowledgement and kept chatting between them. I glanced at Obie again, listened to a bit of the chatter, and wondered why we were waiting.

I cleared my throat. "Are we waiting for something?"

One of them looked at me. "Yeah, aren't you going to put the hellhound in his crate? You're the vet, right? Or do we need to get some brooms to guide him?"

"No, I'm on it," I said quickly. The idea of them poking Obie into the crate was horrific even though I knew that was how it often went. And if I didn't succeed with my pepperoni, we would have no other choice.

I entered the bay with my packet of pepperoni, feeling more stressed than I should. I knew this was going to be a stressful experience for Obie and I hated that we had to put him through this. I hated that his previous experience with people had traumatised him so.

Obie looked up when he heard me and his lips went up in a pre-snarl but didn't fully morph into a growl.

"Oh, do you recognise me?" I held out the crinkly packet of pepperoni, sounds which no longer seemed to scare the hellhound. "Or are you after this?"

He looked past me at the door but didn't sit up like he had done in the past few days. Maybe the crowd outside was unsettling him. If only I'd had time to get here earlier, then I could've taken my time to get him in the crate but here we were.

I opened the packet of pepperoni and tossed one his way, hoping that giving him a taste would remind him how much he liked these.

He sat up and licked his lips, his eyes widening. His ears wobbled in what I'd come to understand was him trying to figure out what was going on. I loved seeing that inquisitive side coming out of him and I hoped to cultivate it as we spent more time together.

Since he seemed pretty receptive today, I dropped another piece of pepperoni closer to the crate.

He went for it almost right away. That was a great sign.

Encouraged, I put down another piece, and another, creating a little trail of salami that he was following eagerly.

He was so happy about the pepperoni, he didn't seem to notice he was inching closer and closer to the crate with every slice.

"Just a little more, just a little more," I encouraged him, silently screaming when he stuck his snout into the crate. That was closer than he'd ever come before and he was already looking at the next treat, the one that would get him all the way into the transport crate.

Loud laughter came from outside and it startled Obie. His tail went between his legs and he backtracked all the way to his corner with that scared expression of his.

For fuck's sake! That was so bloody close.

I stomped out of the room and glared at the group of movers. "Hey, would you mind keeping it down? You're stressing out Obie and he won't go into the crate."

"Can't we just push him in?" One of them asked with a frustrated edge to their voice.

Someone else nodded. "Yeah, let's just use the brooms to herd him into the crate. Then we can get on with the move."

The group pushed into the bay and shoved the brooms through the spokes of the enclosure. Obie growled at the intrusion and pressed himself into the smallest ball to get away from them. One of them managed to push the handle into his thigh and he whimpered and bit the broom.

Watching it was awful and I could see Obie grow more and more agitated from all the prodding and shouting. This was definitely not the way, couldn't they see they were

stressing him out?

It was no surprise when he scratched at the floor, sending a shower of sparks up around him. He caught fire immediately and howled in fear.

My heart broke and I hated how this had gone. Mostly, I hated that I let it get this far.

"Okay, that's enough. Everyone out!" I commanded, relieved when people evacuated the bay. I gave Obie one last look before stepping out and closing the door firmly.

I'd gone about this all wrong.

The fire alarm went off, the blaring adding insult to injury. The people grumbled and complained like they weren't partially to blame for this.

"Now we have to wait until he's all burned out before we can prod him again. I have other things to do," one of them complained.

"We're not prodding him again," I decided, earning some frustrated glares but I didn't care.

I shouldn't have let it get to this point in the first place and I was so mad at myself for not standing my ground.

"We're going to give Obie time to calm down and we'll try this again tomorrow with treats.

If it doesn't work, then we'll try again the next day. "

One of them scoffed. "I don't have time for that."

"Then make time," I commanded. "We're doing this my way."

The group grumbled and dispersed, leaving me with doubt growing in my mind. I knew this was the correct choice for Obie but should I have handled it differently? What would Jacob say if he found out that I sent everyone away instead of persevering?

Did I do the right thing? I didn't know.

EIGHTEEN

It was ungodly early when Felicity and I made our way into the sanctuary. The sun wasn't even up and most animals were still asleep, creating this lovely quiet atmosphere that didn't match the nervous energy sitting within me.

Especially when the Quarantine building came into view.

"I'm stressed," I admitted.

"About the Obie thing?" she guessed. "Why? You did the right thing."

"I still feel bad. I never should have let them poke him. I knew that was going to stress him out. I just didn't have the guts to tell them to stand down."

She touched my arm. "And next time, you will."

"Yeah, I won't let this happen again." I hesitated. "I just hope Jacob or Gwen won't be mad at me for delaying the move. The workmen rushed getting the habitat done so I feel bad that I'm taking my time."

"They won't be mad. Delays happen. It depends on the animal, right? And Obie wasn't ready."

I sighed. "Yeah, I know. I just feel bad. I let them poke Obie with sticks."

"Don't feel bad, it's not easy to advocate for your animals. Especially when you know

that getting him moved out is good for him."

"I just wish I could tell him that." I said, horrified when I thought back to Obie's horrified little face.

We reached the veterinary clinic where Felicity grabbed my hands before I went in.

"You made a mistake. It's not the end of the world.

Obie will be just fine. Just go in a few times today, with your pepperoni, and build up to him going into the crate.

And then once you know you can do it, get a team together to move him. "

"But people want him out of Quarantine. He keeps setting off the fire alarms."

"And that's their problem. You should only concern yourself with Obie's care and comfort."

She was right and I knew she was right. I was just mad at myself for not stepping in sooner and putting my foot down. I could've avoided a lot of unnecessary stress for Obie.

But I wasn't going to make the same mistake. Even if I would have to put in more hours and work to get our hellhound accustomed to the travel crate, it was worth letting him go at his own pace.

"I think I'll just stop by multiple times today to try and lure him into the crate," I said.

She nodded. "Good idea. Don't pressure yourself by setting up a moving party. Just try and get him in the crate and when he does, just see who is free to help you move

him."

"You're so wise."

"I know." She tossed an imaginary strand of hair over her shoulder. "Call me Queen Felicity The Wise."

I snorted. "And now you're a fool."

"You're the one in love with this fool."

A genuine laugh bubbled up from within me and

I went into reception to clock in, give Hatty a scratch while she was sleeping in her bed for once, and went through to Quarantine so I could say hello to Obie before the start of my rounds.

Since it was so early, Quarantine was quiet and I liked that much better than when the animals were shrieking and quacking or if it was full of people. This way, it felt like it was just me and the animals and nobody else in the world.

I got to Obie's bay and checked the window, shocked to see him curled up in the transport crate instead of his usual corner. Maybe the stress from yesterday had caused him to seek out something enclosed, like a den.

This was amazing.

I tiptoed in, my heart pounding in my chest. I couldn't mess this up again. This was my chance.

Obie opened his eyes when he heard me coming, two red glowing orbs in the

darkness of his transport crate.

"Just me," I said, hoping that our mishap from yesterday hadn't broken all the trust we built.

He blinked slowly, let out a sigh, and stayed nestled in the crate.

"You're a good boy, a very good boy. You stay right there, nice and easy." I inched closer, holding my breath for the last bit. I just needed to reach in and drop the gate and he would be stuck in the crate.

I could do it quickly and let it slam shut but the thud might scare him so doing it without any harsh sudden sounds was probably better. And if it didn't work, then I was no further away from accomplishing my goal.

Obie watched me as I reached in and flipped the latch for the gate up. The metal grate came down and I caught it before it fell down. He let out a rumble that could've been a growl but was much softer.

My hands were shaking but I brought the gate down and clicked it into place, locking Obie into the transport crate.

Success!

I pumped my fist for a quiet celebration. Now I just needed to find some manpower to move him and we were golden.

"You're so clever, Obie. Here, have a treat." I grabbed my packet of pepperoni and fed him some slices so he would hopefully come to think of the transport crate as a safe space.

Now I just needed to find people to help me, people who weren't cranky and tired. I grabbed my phone so I could fire off a message to Felicity, just in case she hadn't started her daily duties yet and left the bay so I could use my walkie-talkie without scaring Obie.

"This is Charlotte, I'm in Quarantine and need one or two people to come help me move a hellhound. It should only take twenty minutes. Maybe half an hour. Over."

Jacob's tired voice came through the speaker. "Didn't you move the hellhound yesterday?"

So much for my boss not finding out.

"No, we didn't manage to get Obie in the crate," I said in my walkie-talkie. I wiped my forehead, bracing myself for his reaction. I'd been up all night worrying about it and now I was about to find out.

It was quiet for a little bit before Jacob responded. "I can be there in five minutes. Do you think we can do it with just the two of us?"

I glanced into Obie's bay, trying to estimate how much he weighed. It couldn't be a huge amount so I didn't see why the two of us wouldn't be able to lift the crate out to the trolley.

"Yes, the two of us will be alright. Thank you," I said in the walkie-talkie, my worries not eased just yet. Maybe he didn't want to critique my decisions over the general channel and was going to make them in person. Or worse, keep them for my next performance review.

While I waited for Jacob to arrive, I wheeled the cart from the storage facility in the hallway, and checked up on Obie. He was pretending to be asleep and curled up very

tightly.

"You look nice and snuggly. You like the transport crate after all?"

He let out a sigh that almost sounded content. Maybe he was going to be okay after all.

NINETEEN

The crate wasn't nearly as heavy as expected and Jacob and I lifted it out without an issue. Obie looked spooked but remained flat on his belly while softly growling.

"We're just taking a little trip. You'll like where we're going," I said, hoping to put him at ease with my voice.

For safety, we put a fireproof blanket over the crate. It would block unwelcome sounds and smells and help smother the fire if he decided to burst into flames.

I didn't like that we couldn't see him anymore but

I cringed when we put the crate on the trolley with a loud clang. Obie jolted up and nervously curled back into another ball. He was doing so well though and hadn't set him or us on fire so I counted that as a win.

Jacob secured the cart on the trolley with straps and nodded. "That shouldn't go anywhere."

"It's a good thing it's so early, that means we can use the main roads to get Obie to his new home," I said, still waiting for him to comment on how I handled the moving situation yesterday.

He just nodded. "Good shout. Do you want to steer or push?"

"I'll push," I said, not quite confident enough to boss my boss around. It was better to

let him take the lead so I didn't make another faux-pas.

With that decided, we set in motion. The park was lovely and quiet which was great because it meant less distraction and agitation for Obie. It was such a good sign that he hadn't burst into flames yet, maybe that meant we could accomplish this without causing him too much distress.

We got to a part of the path that was covered in bark chips which I wasn't too excited about but the detour would tack on five or ten more minutes and the park was about to wake up.

Maintenance, nurses, security, keepers, canteen staff, they were all about to come in and that always roused the animals.

And we had some loud animals in the park.

Jacob grunted when he pulled the trolley on and I gave it a little extra push. The bark made for uneven rolling and it rattled the crate and the cart together. With every metallic clatter, I worried that Obie was getting more and more agitated.

Hopefully, we could get to the habitat before we wore his patience down.

We managed to make it across the bark chipping which meant it was the last stretch. I could see the habitat from here, it was just down the hill.

"How's our hellhound doing in there?" Jacob asked from the front of the cart.

"He seems nice and relaxed." I lifted the fireproof blanket to have a little peek and two red eyes stared right back at me. "He looks nice and snug. I think he likes the small enclosed space."

"I think they made a nice den for him in the habitat," Jacob said, humming as he guided the cart along.

This was all going suspiciously well. I didn't know if Obie had just made a lot of progress or if he was so scared, he couldn't even combust.

We reached the crate and Jacob swiped his badge to gain entry. The gate unlocked with a click and that brought us to the last portion of the move. Carrying Obie's crate into the actual habitat.

"On my count," Jacob said as he released the straps. "Three, two, one."

I lifted the crate, worried when I could feel Obie shift his weight which was throwing the balance off.

Shuffling backwards, Jacob kicked some doors open with his foot. One of them slammed and there was more rattling in the cage. Obie was getting agitated which was not a good thing.

"We should hurry," I said, although I was sure Jacob was coming to the same conclusion.

He nodded and opened another door with one hand which almost made the crate slip from my hands. The blanket slipped away and the sudden light made Obie bark. It was an unexpected loud noise that I hadn't heard from him before and not a good one.

"Just a little further, Obie," I said, but it was too late.

He pawed at the bars of the transport crate and his nails scraped down the metal. I could smell the sparks before they landed on his fur where they instantly engulfed him with fire.

Jacob shouted for me to step away when he released his grip, making the crate tip towards the ground. The rational part of my brain knew I should let go but the foolish part of me was too concerned with dropping him on the ground.

I pulled back but I could tell from the way my hands were tingling that I held on for too long.

"Are you okay?" Jacob asked as he hurried over to me. "Charlotte! Go put your hands in lukewarm water right away."

"But Obie?—"

"Now," he commanded, looking quite furious and alarmed.

With a defeated nod and tingling palms, I had to leave Obie behind without checking up on him. So much for taking good care of him. If this kept up, Jacob was never going to let me look after an animal on my own again.

When I returned from the bathroom, Obie's crate was no longer on the ground. There was just a scorch mark on the cement that I knew the cleaning crew would have to deal with. I went further inside, glad that my hands were no longer hurting.

I really should have just let go as soon as I registered what was happening. There was no way I could've avoided dropping Obie but I could've avoided hurting myself.

Inside, Jacob was standing by the enclosure. He turned when he heard me coming, concern evident on his face. "Are you okay? Show me your hands."

I held them out, relieved that they weren't blistering or anything. "I'm fine, I think I avoided the worst."

He shook his head. "You should still see the nurse. And be a bit more careful, is this the second time you got burned?"

"With Obie? Yes."

"The fact you have to ask with Obie is concerning. Charlotte, you need to take better care of yourself. I know you love these animals but you keep getting hurt. That kind of recklessness isn't actually good."

An unpleasant feeling curled through me. "Sorry."

"You don't need to apologise. Just... be more careful. Look after yourself."

"Looking after animals is hard. Looking after myself is even harder," I admitted.

He gave me a sympathetic smile. "I know, but you have to. The animals deserve you at your best."

I nodded. "I know. I'll do better."

"Good." He nodded, seemingly satisfied. "Now come have a look at Obie."

"Is he hurt?"

"Not at all. He darted out of the crate as soon as we opened the gate. The drop did spook him." Jacob pointed towards the far corner of the enclosure where a bunch of boulders had been stacked together. "But look, he's already found one of the hiding spots the work crew made for him."

It was a little sad that he was so far away that I couldn't see him but I just had to trust that he was made of strong stuff.

"How did you get him in here by yourself?" I asked.

"Oh, I didn't, I made a passing security guard help lift the crate."

"That makes sense." I looked out at Obie, relieved that he already found a little place to hide. This was going to be so much better for him than the limited Quarantine bay. Here, he could run around, sniff, scrape his nails, and enjoy the fresh air.

I looked at Jacob. "Did the Cryptic Conservation get back to us about whether they had a place for him?"

My mentor nodded. "They said that at this time they don't want to disrupt their pack."

"And is there anywhere else that'll take him?" I quietly crossed my fingers in my pocket, hoping that he could stay with us.

"Not at the moment. He's been through a lot so we'll let him settle in here for now."

"That's probably for the best." I sighed as I leaned against the railing. "It's a shame he's all alone."

Jacob checked his phone. "It is. I can't share much about it because the case is still being made but the private collection was trying to start an underground hellhound breeding scheme. There were others."

My stomach twisted. "Poor Obie. Poor other hellhounds. Why did they even want to breed them?"

"For profit. They were going to sell them as some sort of elite guard dog situation, you know, for the ultra rich."

"That's sick."

"It is. There are some horrible people in this world." He stared out into the distance, lost in thought. It took his phone buzzing for him to return to me. "I should get this, it's probably more lawyers from IREMA."

"Thanks for helping with moving him," I said before he could take off.

He nodded. "Of course. I think Obie is going to be much happier here. You did a good job."

I took that last comment as a remark on the whole way I handled his care and relief took away some of the stress in my stomach. I clearly didn't mess up too badly if Jacob was complimenting me.

Since my shift hadn't started yet, I stayed with Obie for a little longer.

It was great that we managed to move him but my work wasn't done yet.

I didn't just want him to live in a hidden corner of his enclosure, I wanted him to gain confidence and joy and give him the life he never had in the private collection.

He deserved that and so much more.

TWENTY

It was drizzling slightly but not enough for it to be a bother. It was actually quite refreshing and cool and Felicity looked adorable with her frizzled hair. And the upside was that the sanctuary was nice and empty because nobody wanted to come on a daytrip in miserable weather.

Felicity slipped her hand in mine and I hissed in pain.

She instantly let go. "I'm sorry, is your hand still tender?"

I nodded. "Just a little."

She twisted my hand up and gave my palm a very, very gentle kiss. "I'm sorry you got hurt."

"It's okay, it's my fault for not letting go. I don't even know why I did that, it wasn't like I was going to be able to hold the crate up on my own."

"You just care. A little too much sometimes."

"Jacob said the same thing." I sighed. "Is it really bad?"

Felicity paused in the rain, a droplet rolling down her nose. "I say this with love but you can be a bit obsessive."

I frowned at her statement. "I'm not."

"A little. When an animal captures your heart, you live and breathe taking care of it. Everything else in the world disappears. You forget to eat, to sleep, to spend time with me."

It did ring true which was a little confronting, especially when I thought I'd been doing better at balancing my life and the demands of my job.

Apparently not.

We continued on to the new Hellhound House while I thought about it. She was right, I did forget anything and everything else when I was focused on an animal. In the past weeks, I spent every free moment I had to put Obie at ease. Even if it wasn't really in my job description.

We reached the new hellhound house and passed the scorch mark when we went inside. I was curious to see that Obie was getting on in his new enclosure and hoped that yesterday's events didn't forge an association between me and stress.

We got to the enclosure and I realised we weren't alone. A woman with lots of tiny dark braids was mopping the area. She looked up when she saw us and gave a wide smile. "Hello. Can I help you?"

"Umm. I'm here to check on Obie. I'm on the veterinarian team. Who are you?"

"Mandy, I'm Obsidian's new keeper." She gave me a thoughtful look. "You must be Charlotte."

I hummed. "I didn't realise Obie got assigned a keeper."

"I was transferred yesterday." She smiled. "Obie. That's a cute nickname. Much better than calling him Obsidian. I think I'll use that from now on too."

An unpleasant feeling made my stomach clench. I knew this person was just doing their job but it felt like they were coming between me and Obie.

Felicity cleared her throat. "So why did you get chosen to look after Obie? Did you already work here or do you have experience with hellhounds?"

"Oh yeah, I've been here at the Griffin Sanctuary for almost ten years. I have a few part-time animals which is perfect so I can make Obie my main focus."

I fidgeted with my hands. "He's very scared and shy so don't be offended if he ignores you for weeks. That's what he did to me."

"I don't mind that," she said with a smile and a shrug. "I used to work with rescue dogs before I came here so I know a thing or two about handling scared dogs. You have to let them come to you but when they do, it's magic."

"How are you handling feeding time?" I inquired. "Obie's very particular. I've noticed he only eats out of a round metal bowl and his favourite snack is pepperoni. I can tell you which his favourite brand is."

Mandy smiled. "Oh, that's not necessary. I already read it in his file. You included a lot of detailed notes which were very helpful, so thank you."

Her dismissal was rubbing me up the wrong way even though I had no reason to feel that way. It was great that Obie had a dedicated keeper, it meant he was upgraded to a permanent member of the Griffin Sanctuary family. So why did this feel so horrible?

When an awkward silence fell over us, Felicity carried on the conversation. "So is Obie exploring his new home?"

Mandy turned towards the enclosure. "He sniffed a few spots earlier this morning but

he's mostly sticking to that corner in the back.

I'm giving him some time to get used to me before I start working on enrichment.

Maybe I'll use the pepperoni to get him to do some nosework.

That's what we call engaging their sense of smell. "

"I know what nosework is," I replied tersely.

"Of course." Mandy looked at me directly. "So are you here to do a medical check-up or were you just dropping by?"

"I wanted to make sure he was settling in alright and the move or fall hadn't caused him any more stress," I said, omitting the fact that this wasn't an official assignment. Then again, Jacob did say Obie was in my care so technically, I got to decide when I wanted to check up on him.

Mandy nodded and gestured to the enclosure. "Be my guest. It was nice to meet you. I heard that you were very dedicated but it's nice to see it for myself. Obie is lucky to have someone like you look after him."

I ignored her as I made my way into the habitat, glad to be away from this new keeper. Felicity matched my pace, her hand finding the small of my back. The comforting gesture made me relax slightly which was good because I knew Obie would be able to pick up on my stress and frustration.

"She was so passive-aggressive," I grumbled once we were out of earshot.

Felicity gave me a look. "Really? She seemed really nice to me."

"No? She kept giving all these underhanded compliments."

"I think they were genuine compliments. Why would she be passive-aggressive?"

A huff came from deep within me. "Okay, maybe she was being genuine. I just felt suffocated and like she's taking Obie away from me."

"Oh, Char." Felicity touched my face. "Nobody is taking Obie away from you. The bond you've formed with him already won't be erased simply because now there's someone else who will take care of him."

"I know that, logically . It's just that now he's not in Quarantine anymore, I won't be able to see him as much anymore. And I can't keep checking in on him daily."

We reached the end of the habitat and checked the den. Stone boulders had been piled on top of each other to create a nice alcove that was a perfect resting place for a hellhound like Obie. I crouched down to look into it, pleased when two red eyes stared back at me.

"Hello, Obie. You look nice and cosy down there."

He closed his eyes, perfectly blending in with the darkness of the den. Such great camouflage for an animal that could be the top of the food chain if it wished.

I grabbed the packet of pepperoni and pulled the plastic off. The sound made Obie open his eyes again and he poked his snout out.

"Aha, is someone in the mood for a snack?" I dangled the first slice in the air, hoping to entice him out. I wanted to have a proper look at him, just to assure myself that he was going to be alright from now on.

Obie stirred and I automatically moved back, just in case his nails sparked a fire. I didn't want another brush with his flames and I knew to be more careful if I didn't want to get hurt again.

It took a moment but Obie clambered out of the den, his nose wobbling as he followed the scent of the spicy sausage. It was remarkable how much more cooperative he was now than in the beginning even after the added stress of the move.

I tossed him the first slice. "Are you enjoying your new home?"

His ears wobbled as he chomped down on his snack. There was even a slight tail quiver that could be considered the beginning of a wag.

I gave him another piece. "I hope you'll be very happy here."

He gobbled it up happily and came a little closer looking for more. It was adorable and it reassured me that our encounter yesterday did not affect him too much. He was resilient which made sense, he did survive the private collection.

I crouched down so I could assess his physical state.

He'd definitely gained weight since he came into our care.

His ribs were no longer poking out the same way and he stood a little taller.

The difference was amazing and it made all the time and effort worth it.

He looked a lot happier and at ease too, happily munching on the snacks.

My stomach twisted into a painful knot and my voice came out shakier than I wanted. "I'm going to miss him."

Without missing a beat, Felicity wrapped one arm around me. The warmth in her gesture broke something inside me and hot tears pooled in my eyes before inevitably falling down. I grabbed hold of her and buried my face into her arm.

"I don't know why I'm so sad."

"Because you care so, so much."

"But I've looked at lots of animals before and I've not felt like this before."

She rubbed my back soothingly. "Sometimes we bond more with certain animals. It's okay to be sad. It just means you did it with heart."

I nodded and let the sadness trickle away, feeling a lot lighter now that I'd let it out. It felt a little embarrassing to cry over an animal that wasn't even leaving the sanctuary, just moving out of my care.

And for that I could only be grateful.

We got up so we could leave Obie in peace and Felicity bumped her shoulder into me. "I have an idea. How about we celebrate Obie's move with a pizza party of our own? I've missed spending time with you and you could use a quiet evening."

I felt myself smile. "That sounds wonderful. But no pepperoni, I'm kind of sick of it."

She laughed and pulled me closer. "Fair enough."

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TWENTY-ONE

Time passed unexpectedly quickly and every time I checked up on Obie, he was visibly doing better and gaining confidence.

Instead of staying confined to one corner or his den, he'd gradually started to venture out and explore his habitat.

He stopped hiding his tail between his legs and was no longer nearly as picky when he ate his dinner.

It was wonderful to see him change and blossom into the majestic creature that inspired the legends and stories.

I stopped by more than necessary which Mandy graciously never complained anything about.

Just like Felicity said, she was genuinely only interested in Obie's welfare.

And with her attention and expertise, Obie came even more out of his shell.

He would vocalise his demands more, spritz around the habitat to mark his territory, and once I saw him sleeping in the sun with his belly up.

That was the kind of bliss any animal deserved and it was the most lovely sight for someone that used to cower in fear of his own shadow.

If he kept making progress like this, the habitat might even become available for the public.

Considering how adorable he was, I had no doubt visitors would love him.

With a smile, I walked into the building.

The signs had been replaced and now proudly declared it the Hellhound House.

I made my way towards the enclosure, my heart leaping when I saw Obie watching Mandy as she cleaned his habitat.

He was lying on his stomach and had a curious relaxed look on his face that was the most wonderful thing to see.

His coat was shiny and gorgeous and his tongue was hanging out of his mouth.

I could see his nails had naturally worn from the stone floor and his eyes were bright and full of life too.

He was unrecognisable from the malnourished hellhound we rescued and I loved seeing him like this.

I waved to get Mandy's attention who waved back which I took as an invite. I didn't waste a moment going through the gates to get into the habitat, pleased when Obie looked up when he saw me. He didn't come leaping and bounding my way but he wagged his tail and licked his lips.

Mandy laughed loudly, a sound that previously would've scared Obie but didn't faze him anymore. "Look who it is! It's the pepperoni lady!"

I couldn't help but smile. I'd definitely gained an interesting reputation around the sanctuary but at least pepperoni lady was better than bitten-in-the-butt lady.

Obie trotted towards me, maintaining a safe distance as always. He still wasn't super comfortable around people but this was such a massive difference with when he came here. I was so proud of him.

"I brought treats," I said, reaching for the packet of spicy salami.

As soon as I showed it, Obie's eyes widened and his ears went up. He trampled impatiently and barked, clearly excited for his snack. I tossed a slice towards him and he hoovered it up in seconds before looking at me with the same inquisitive look.

I gave him a few more slices and put the packet with the rest back in my pocket. Too much pepperoni wasn't good for him but it was still his favourite treat.

Mandy approached, broom in hand, and with a big smile. "You know, you remind me a little of my daughter."

"I do?"

She nodded. "We have a dog at home and my daughter has that same focused look on her face when she feeds him treats. It's adorable. My daughter is five though."

I laughed. "I just really love animals."

"I can see that. It's a wonderful thing. Obie is very lucky he had someone like you to look out for him. You have a talent for it. If you're ever looking for a different job, the rescue I worked with is always looking for more people."

"I appreciate that but I'm happy here. Working in the Griffin Sanctuary is my dream

job," I declared.

Something nudged my side and I looked down, gasping when Obie was pressing his snout against my pepperoni pocket. He'd never approached me like that before and my heart felt like it could burst.

He flinched slightly when I turned to face him but didn't run away and kept sniffing my pocket, clearly determined to get some more. He had come such a long way, it was enough to make me tear up. And now he was looking at me with those bright happy eyes. It was like falling in love all over again.

Mandy looked enamoured too. "He's never done that before. Wow, what a brave boy you are."

"So brave," I agreed while I gave him more slices of pepperoni. It didn't matter that I shouldn't have, I was ready to give him the world.

Obie happily munched on his treats, gave the empty packet a good sniff to make sure it was empty, and trotted away after that.

I laughed. "I feel so used and honoured at the same time."

Mandy chuckled too. "They're cheeky, aren't they?"

"So cheeky," I agreed, smiling so much it was making my cheeks hurt. "I can't believe he just nudged my pocket for more treats. That's so bold."

"It's a fantastic sign, it means he sees you as a safe person."

I melted even more when I looked at Obie. It wasn't often that I questioned what my favourite mythical animal was. I'd always always loved unicorns. Obie was giving

them a run for their money though. Maybe not as a whole species but as an individual for sure.

My walkie-talkie chimed. "Requesting veterinary assistance for the peryton park, please."

Someone else answered, likely Ivan based on the voice. "On my way."

Mandy looked intrigued. "Is that about the pregnant peryton?"

"It might be. Or one of the perytons got something stuck in their antlers. You never know, animals are silly."

"That's right. Speaking off silly animals, if you don't mind, I need to do some poop scooping."

"I will leave you to it," I said, waving at Obie when I left. It was such a joy to see him like this, even if I couldn't visit as much as I wanted. Still, my heart was full and I felt a kind of pride in myself that I hadn't before.

I made this happen. Not on my own, not without help, but that didn't take away the accomplishment. Maybe we weren't changing the world just yet but all our efforts had changed the world for Obie. That was good enough for today.

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I yawned and leaned against Felicity as we entered the sanctuary. "I'm so tired."

She kissed my forehead. "I know. You didn't have to come over last night after working such a long shift."

"But I've missed you."

"And whose fault is that?" she teased.

"I know. I'm sorry for spending so much time with Obie. It would be so much easier if we lived together."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

Worry curled through me and woke me up faster than coffee. "No?"

"Not no. Keep talking."

This wasn't exactly where I envisaged us having this conversation but it made sense, we spent so much time here, it was bound to happen.

"Well, if we lived together then we'd be able to do casual breakfasts and evenings so much easier because one of us wouldn't have to keep going back and forth for clothes, or food, or any of those things.

And we wouldn't have to deal with noisy roommates," I reasoned, not sure if this was the kind of practical proposal people wanted when it came to taking a big step like

this.

Felicity reached for my hand. "You're making some good points."

"But?"

"No buts. I think it would be great to see more of you. If I'm honest, I've been thinking about it too and can't say I love living with my roommates."

"That sounds like a yes," I said, not sure if it was too early to start celebrating.

Felicity chuckled and leaned in to kiss me, her lips soft and warm. "It's a yes. I love you."

"I love you too. More than mythical animals."

She laughed. "No, you don't. And I don't need you to love me more either. But equally would be good."

"I do. You're my favourite person," I tried again, hoping that this would convey my feelings better because she was right, I wouldn't give up working with mythical animals for anything in the world. Not even Felicity, not that she would ever ask that of me.

"And you're mine," she returned with an affectionate smile. "But speaking of mythical animals, I'm going to be late to feed the herd and you know how grumpy they get if I'm late with their breakfast."

I chuckled and kissed her quickly before she dashed off.

And she liked to call me a workaholic but she was just as dedicated and devoted.

Maybe it didn't make our relationship the easiest but it made it so easy to love her.

Even if we broke up, I would always admire this quality of hers.

But luckily, it didn't sound like we were breaking up. We were moving forward.

Feeling much more energised, I continued on to the veterinarian clinic, not at all surprised to find Hatty asleep in the middle of the path. She looked so happy in the early morning sun and gave me a challenging look that made it clear she wasn't moving a muscle.

"Don't worry, I'll just step over you," I said, reaching down to scratch her tummy first. The house sphinx was such a character but the clinic wouldn't be the same without her.

I pushed into reception, surprised to find Jacob behind the desk. That was unusual.

"Good morning," I said, not sure what to make of it.

He looked up with tired eyes. "Is it morning?"

"It is. Seven o'clock."

"Ah."

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I just came off a long, long, long call with IREMA. They're finally moving forward with the court case and they're heading to trial."

I gasped. "That's amazing though."

"It is. I can't wait for the owners of the private collection to get the karma they deserve." He rubbed his chin, scratching the slight stubble that had formed there. "But I'm going to be glad when this is all over. I've not had nearly enough sleep."

"Me either."

He hummed. "I heard you pulled lots of extra hours working with Obie as well. How is he doing?"

"He's doing fantastic. He's settled right in at his new home. His weight is right where it should be and he's gained so much confidence. He doesn't combust into flames nearly as much either."

"That's wonderful. I know that was a tough one to handle. You did a good job."

I beamed with pride. "Thank you. It was challenging and I definitely got too attached."

"I know what that feels like. Some animals just get to you."

One of my first was an abandoned baby rainbow-tailed lemur that I raised to adulthood by hand.

I fed it every day with a tiny bottle and it used to climb onto my shoulder.

" Jacob smiled fondly. "I was absolutely devastated when she was transferred. "

"My heart would break."

"Yeah, mine did but it was for the best. She got to join an established group of lemurs and even raised some babies herself. I still get pictures from the keeper." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, knowing that I made such a huge difference helped with the

pain of saying goodbye."

I smiled. "I know that. And it's not like Obie is far away, I can still visit him when I have time."

"Exactly." He smiled at me. "I'm proud of you. Just don't overwork yourself too much or put yourself in danger."

"I will try," I said, which was the best promise I could make him.

Our walkie-talkies chimed at the same time and Maria's voice came through. "Jacob, are you there? I need some assistance in the peryton park."

He frowned as he brought the device to his mouth. "Everything okay?"

Her reply came right away. "The peryton fawn is coming earlier than expected and I'm not sure what I'm looking at."

That was concerning coming from a neonatal specialist.

"On my way." Jacob grabbed his coat from the back of the chair and waltzed past me, not even looking back. "You're coming, right?"

I was already on his heels. "Of course, what did you think?"

He laughed. "Never change."

I wasn't planning on it but it was always good to have my mentor's stamp of approval. And why would I change when there were so many exciting animals to work with? This was the best job in the world.

* * *

Thank you for reading *The Hellhound Growl*. Charlotte's journey as a veterinarian at the Griffin Sanctuary continues in the next book *The Peryton Fawn* where an unexpected newcomer throws everyone for a loop.