

Perrot and the Farm of Mythical Beasts

B. Ile

“Is that a unicorn? Why is it bald?”

Perrot did not know the boy’s name and neither had he asked. It was written on the official form he had come with, but Perrot had not read that either. The boy would not be here long enough for it to matter either way.

“A reform”, the magistrate had said. “Let the youth invigorate the old arts.”

Never had such an insult befallen the grand institution of the Farm of Mythical Beasts, not in Perrot’s previous forty-four years as master of the creatures, nor in Borr the Idle’s thirty-two years before him, or in Toum the Tamer’s sixty-three before that, or in any of the hundreds of years of the Farm, counting all the way back to Pip the Beastslayer. If history was kind to him, Perrot would be known as the Unfortunate for having allowed it or the Patient for having borne it. More likely, however, for breaking the tradition of a single human living on the farm, Perrot’s name would be etched in infamy with a moniker of ill-repute, perhaps the Traitor or the Broken.

At the moment, however, Perrot cared for none of that, because Perrot was very Angry.

I know what needs invigorating, he thought. *And it’s not my farm.*

“Here we are,” he said when they reached the edge of the plot. “This will be your task.”

The boy, cap hanging over his eyes and jacket dragging on the grass behind him, gaped at him. “What is that?”

Perrot cooed and beckoned the creature closer. “An Avalerion, the very last of its kind.”

The bird lowered its head to be petted, its neck twisting in the leather collar restraining it to the post at their feet. Long ago, when its mate still lived, the Avalerion wore a coat

of silver and blue feathers that shimmered like the waters of a lake. The spread of its wings, spanning seven meters from tip to tip, painted a thousand blue shadows on the Farmer's Cottage when it took flight under the noon rays. But now its feathers had dulled to a monotone grey, and the rope around its neck may as well have been a saw to its wings. No more flight, no more beauty, no more life. That too the magistrate of magical affairs had decreed.

"Where are its parents?" the boy asked. "Did they leave him?"

"Ha! You could say that. Drowned themselves in that lake over there as soon as their eggs were laid – two of them only. That's the way of it."

"Where's the other one then?"

Perrot crouched before the boy and put a bracing hand on his shoulder. "That's none of your damn business." He straightened. "Now then. An Avalerion requires little care. Practically self-sufficient. But there is one little thing that you have to provide it with."

The boy squinted up at him. "What is it?"

"You have to feed it sphinx milk."

"... Sphinxes make milk?"

"Oh, they do. It has all sorts of magical properties." *Most of them deadly.*

The boy's eyes darted between his charge and the sphinx sitting in its enclosure a way beyond the Farmer's Cottage. "And you're sure there's nothing else I can do for it?"

"I've been working the Farm for longer than you've been alive, boy. Give it the milk, and for Pip's sake, do not, under any circumstances, remove the collar. Got it?"

"Yeah, got it."

"That didn't sound convincing."

"I got it!"

“Good, then get to it.”

And so Perrot left him, hoping that by the end of the week he would have a dead Avalerion, an apprentice put in chains, a farm returned to its traditional state, and a magistrate educated on the usefulness of the youth. Surely an extinct species would do it.

Better to have an extinct species than a revolution to my name, Perrot mused as he returned to his routine. History will lament the first, but shun the other. Better yet, for having killed them, I will be the Last Master of the Avalerions.

And that made Perrot very Happy.

For all that he cared little for the creatures, Perrot considered himself to be a meticulous caretaker. Borr the Idle had left the farm in a dire state, and it had taken thirty-years of back-breaking work and the life of one-of-two Avalerions to return it to a semblance of its original glory. Every day, Perrot slaved at the grain machines, shaved the unicorns’ manes, sparred with the centaurs, sang to the forest fairies, and spared the sphinx enough time for a riddle too complicated to solve. If the unicorns shyly hid from him, he coaxed them out patiently; if the centaurs didn’t invite him to their meetings after the spar, he respected their privacy; if the fairies interrupted his singing to bestow him with gifts of food and nectar, he thanked them profusely. There was nothing any of them could complain about, and Perrot intended for the magistrate to see it.

By the time he headed back to the Cottage, the faraway mountain peaks were blushing under the sunrays. Perrot hung up his hat, took off his shoes, and washed his hands. He was halfway through his dinner preparations when the boy flung the door open and dropped his satchel by the coat rack.

Perrot had completely forgotten about him. “You’re still here? Thought the sphinx would have eaten you.”

The boy sat at the table. *Need an old man to make your dinner, eh?* “I can’t take its milk yet. I have to tame it first.”

“Ha! Pip the Beastslayer took care of that, and what he overlooked Toum the Tamer finished.”

“He didn’t finish it very well, then.”

Perrot slammed the pot of stew on the table. “What would you know of it, boy? Eat your bowl and off to bed with you. The Avalerion wakes before sunrise.”

Perrot watched him eat and thought he had finally silenced him, but then the boy grimaced. “This stew is terrible.”

Perrot shoved a spoonful into his mouth and chewed. *Not long*, he reminded himself. *Not long until he’s gone, one way or another.*

For the remainder of the week, Perrot kept a cursory eye on the boy. He spied him out on the grounds when he woke every morning, his window framing the boy’s silhouette sitting in front of the Avalerion on the backdrop of cotton clouds popping in the pink sky. The first time he caught himself watching them, Perrot shook himself out of his stupor and trudged down the steps to make breakfast. The boy did not eat in the morning, but he came for lunch and dinner every day without fail, blabbering about the blasted creatures all the while.

“The sphinx is so cool,” he was gushing that night around a mouthful of porridge. “He told me a story about green gnomes from the stars building a triangle of rock in an ocean of sand.”

Perrot usually ignored the chatter and grunted in agreement once or twice to pretend he was listening; but the words were so absurd that he jerked his head up from his bowl. “Are you lying to me?”

“I’m not! I told him it was unbelievable, but he insisted-”

“Not the gnomes. The *sphinx*. He only speaks in riddles. He hasn’t peeped a word beyond his usual greeting in more than forty years.”

The boy smirked. “I told you I would tame him.”

“Oh, you think you’re clever, don’t you? The sphinx doesn’t talk. Next you’ll tell me the centaurs invited you to their circle.”

“Not yet, but Chiron said I could come to the next one, if the topic was appropriate.”

Perrot stared at him. “Chiron?”

“You know. The leader. The one with the goatee and the long hair.”

“Why hasn’t he given me his name?”

The boy scrapped the bottom of his empty bowl with his spoon. “They don’t like you very much.”

“The centaurs? The centaurs don’t like me?”

He’d submitted himself to daily beatings against them and respected their privacy, and this was his reward? Gossip and rejection when a boy of age to still be hanging to his mother’s skirts was welcome among them?

“Well,” Perrot said, “they won’t see me with a weapon in hand again.”

“Oh, that’s good! They don’t like to spar.”

What now? “Yes, they do.”

“They told me they’re too old for it now. Chiron said the group voted for an easy retirement when Borr the Idle took over, and they’re a bit bummed that you’re making them work again.”

Perrot opened and closed his mouth several times before he found his words. “But that’s how Toum did it.”

“They didn’t like him very much either.”

The taste of porridge was turning sour in Perrot's mouth. "Good thing I'm the one in charge, then. They liked Borr the Idle, did they? Because he let them ruin themselves, I bet! Did you know there was barely enough gold to feed one unicorn when I got here?"

The boy shook his head, wide-eyed.

"The centaurs were so out of shape they couldn't even do a lap around their enclosure without shaking in their hooves. And that damn sphinx wouldn't stop singing, even at night! I had to muzzle him for a few days until he learned his lesson. At least, I learned me a few songs for the fairies. Those know how to appreciate me."

The boy coughed and dropped his eyes.

Perrot couldn't believe it. "There can't possibly be more."

"It's just... ah, the fairies think your voice isn't that great."

That was the needle that broke the centaur's back. Perrot pushed away from the table, grabbed the boy by the back of his ridiculously long jacket, and dragged him out of the cottage without a care for his protests. At this hour, the fairies' home lights were all snuffed, but the boy's screams must have woken them, for their windows soon glowed green. Their small faces peeked out from their doors, and the buzz of chatter rose in the forest when they saw him coming.

Perrot tossed the boy at the root of their home-trees. "Gossiping with the newcomer, eh?" he shouted loud enough for all of them to hear, even up in the canopy. "My voice isn't pretty enough for your delicate ears, is it? Come on, come out and say it to my face!"

The fairies descended into a frenzy, wings fluttering faster than Perrot could blink as they weaved from one house to another. Finally, two of them emerged from the shadows with a cake held up between them the size of Perrot's palm. He stared at it, the blood freezing in his veins. The sweet fairies wore twin smiles full of shyness, but, for the first time, Perrot saw something else in them: condescension.

They were feeding him so he would stop – stop shouting, stop singing. Perrot turned away from them, and caught the centaurs watching him across the field with their arms crossed and their faces twisted with disapproval.

Perrot turned tail, and returned to the Cottage, taking the steps so fast he fell, then shut himself in his room. Forty-four years of work and he'd managed to do worse than Borr the Idle. *It won't be the Traitor or the Broken*, he thought as he laid in bed. *It will be the Disgraced.*

He did not sleep that night. Just as the sun painted its first scorching trails on his floorboards, he rose from bed, grabbed his hat, and stepped out onto the grass. The creatures were all asleep at this early hour – all except one.

“I didn't lie to him about that one,” he told the Avalerion as it rubbed its head against his hand. “You wake up earlier than everyone else.”

The beast chirped, shaking its dull wings out. It almost looked happy to see him.

“Borr had almost ruined us when you hatched. You were such a bright thing, you and your brother. Beautiful and lively and happy. I would have never sold him if I knew this was how it would end. He's dead somewhere across the ocean, now, in one of those fighting rings they hold underground. I bet he never got to see the sky one last time. But nobody would blame Borr for it if they knew. The Idle, they call him. Lazy was what he was. Negligent, even. He's the reason I did it, you know. And here I am, worse than he ever was.” He brushed a hand against its ears. “It's a terrible thing, isn't it? To be alone in the world.”

The Avalerion's eyes peered up at him under long silver lashes. The tip of its feathers was almost blue under the rising sun.

Perrot's throat tightened. “Goodbye, old friend.”

He walked away, leaving the deadly bucket of milk where the boy had put it: in easy reach of the only thing in this world that did not hate him.

Perrot had not planned on returning to his duty that day, but he tried to care for the unicorns at the very least. Their manes grew fast and it would be a pain to shave it later if left unattended too long. He was traipsing through the forest, searching for their glittering horns jutting out of some bush, when a thought froze him. *They hide because they hate me. Why am I still bothering with this?* The doubt left him dead to the world for a long time, and when he moved, it was to return to his bed.

And in bed he remained for the next days, long enough that he stopped counting. One night, heart-rending screeches shook the walls of his room, and he turned his back to the window and tried to ignore them. They went on long into the night, growing in pitch and volume, until a knock came at his door. The cries had gone silent. *Ah*, he thought. *The thing's dead.*

He found the strength to move, and opened the door. The boy stood there, cap screwed down over his forehead, jacket trailing to the first step of the stairs. His cheeks were pale, his shoulders tense, his legs shaking.

“Is it dead yet?” Perrot asked. He found his voice hoarse from days of disuse.

The boy blinked up at him. “Who?”

“The beast. Your charge.”

“Why would she be?”

“Then go away.”

But as he made to close the door, the boy pushed back against it. “Wait. There’s something else. Please... come see it.”

The boy was one to brag and talk his ear off, but not one to beg. *Nothing can be worse than what’s already happened*, Perrot thought. With a heavy sigh, he followed the boy down the steps. Morning dew kissed the grass and the scent of lilies wafted over from the forest. But it was to the Avalerion that the boy led Perrot, to his doom that his steps took him, at his failure that his eyes thought to stare.

It had not occurred to Perrot, when he'd passed the threshold of the Farmer's Cottage, that his life could be turned upside down once more in so little time. And yet, the silver egg that lay cocooned under the Avalerion's wing was nothing if not a hammer to the wheel of his fate. Perrot could do nothing but stare for a long time at that smooth, round stone that he'd seen only once before.

"How did this happen?"

The boy fiddled with his cap. "I think it was the milk."

"But the milk can't make it pregnant."

"You said it had magical properties!"

He had, hadn't he? Yet Perrot had seen men die from a drop of that milk and had assumed that the Avalerion would as well. Where did that leave him now? With a species all but extinguished given new hope, all because of a boy he'd tried to banish from his land. All of this, brought about by his own hand.

Perrot could still barely wrap his head around it when, the next day, the magistrate, accompanied by his ever so loyal press officer, landed his car so close to the forest that the fairies started to fan the smoke out.

"Perrot!" the magistrate called as he walked towards him. "Who would have thought, eh? My ideas are always successful, but this? This is a miracle!"

You don't know the half of it.

The magistrate put an arm around his shoulders. "Come. Show me this new egg we've gotten. Of course we want this historical event well documented so I brought a professional along. You don't mind, do you?"

"You'll have to ask the unicorns. They're rather shy."

"...Of course. Ah, here he is. The man of the hour! Or shall I say boy? You're still quite young. And yet so full of ideas. Didn't I tell you, Perrot, that he was full of ideas?"

“You did.”

The magistrate leaned towards the boy. “Why don’t you tell me about your miracle friend?”

The boy hugged the Avalerion close around the neck, where the feathers freed from the yoke of the leather were badly grown. “Her name’s Gwen, and she’s the most magical creature in the world.”

“That she is. Jude! Pictures, please.”

The press officer executed, and the boy delighted in posing with his pet while Perrot and the magistrate stood back.

“Isn’t it wonderful, Perrot? More than just the rebirth of the Avalerion species, you’ve boosted the chances of the apprentice program. I wonder for which one history will remember you. I find myself partial to Perrot the Mentor. It has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?”

“No,” Perrot said, gazing at the boy and his Avalerion. “No, I think I’m Perrot the Lucky.”

Only he would remember that his luck had not been in the Avalerion egg but in having a successor who was worthier than him.