

Pumpkin  
by Catherine Simmerer

Pumpkin? In the petsitting gig, you come across a lot of strange names. And a lot of strange animals, for that matter. When Mrs. Briarwick left the house and laughed, “don’t let her burn the house down, ha ha,” I thought she was joking. With that name, I had expected a puffball rat-dog. What I got was a a puppy-sized, green-scaled, smoking-nostrilled dragon.

I stared through the bars of the sturdy steel crate, wondering if it wasn’t time to put “cats only” on my website. When I first walked into the kitchen, Pumpkin had untangled herself from her blanket and wriggled her long, scaly tail and flapped her wings and chortled at me in excitement. Now, she beat the air with her wings; waves of dragon-smell wafted through the kitchen. Whew. She wanted out.

I looked around the kitchen for a leash, but instead of pet supplies, Mrs. Briarwick kept a pile of ancient-looking, dusty tomes stacked around the crate: *The Highly Sensitive Leviathan*. *What to Expect from an Adolescent Pyromaniac*. *The Joy of Necromancy*. *Mastering the Art of Mastication*. I’m used to seeing cookbooks in the kitchen, but not around fire-breathing pets. Not so near the dragon.

I pushed the books away from the crate and grabbed a spatula off the counter. I held it at arm’s length to open the cage door. From within the crate, Pumpkin sniffed the spatula, snuffled, and snorted a tiny lick of flame at it, catching the wood on fire. I beat out the flames; she wheezed triumphantly and blew sparks on her blanket. The polyester didn’t catch; Pumpkin wheezed again, emitting sparks across the tiled kitchen floor, singeing the corner of *The Picky Omnivore*. Panicked, I chucked the book into the sink and doused it in water. Mrs. Briarwick wouldn’t be happy, but Pumpkin wagged, looking at me for approval. Backing up against the refrigerator door, I stared at the creature I was expected to take for a walk. Pumpkin watched me, her tail flicking expectantly; she snorted and stamped her feet, impatient to get out of the crate. Well, it had to be done. I slowly reached towards the latch on the door. As I pulled the latch, the dragon wagged her tail and snorted, sparks flying across the floor. I opened the door and out hopped Pumpkin. “Well, then,” I said. “Walk?” In a moment of uncontainable delight, she sneezed.