

Wren

by Emily Michel

WREN'S ORANGE WINGS vibrated with excitement as she lugged her new friend through the sun-dappled forest. It wasn't very cooperative, and its slime-slicked skin made her job all the more difficult.

"C'mon, you booger, you're going to love it at the cottage," she said, hefting it up in her arms once again. She would need to jump in the pond when this was over.

It remained to be seen how much the cottage would love her companion. Well, not the cottage exactly. It would be fine. Cottages, even fairy-occupied ones, neither liked nor disliked their inhabitants. But her sisters might object, one in particular.

If she could just get this salamander situated before anyone else returned from patrol, Wren could show her family that Booger—no, that name wouldn't do—was the perfect pet.

The trees thinned out as she approached the clearing. Nestled on one side was the building she'd called home since their appointment as the guardians of the Argent Forest nearly ten years ago. Moss-covered and seemingly in disrepair, the cottage was nearly immaculate inside, warm and cozy year-round. And her new friend would be just the thing to complete their little family.

Maybe not so little. There were seven of them, after all. But as they grew into their duties, it was rare for everyone to gather at the cottage at once. At eighteen, Wren was the youngest and patrolled nearby. She often went weeks without seeing any of her sisters. Sometimes there was evidence they had stopped by while she was away. And sometimes it was so lonely she wanted to cry. Or run off to Lorea and offer her services to the crown princess and her family.

But a pet...oh, a pet could be the ideal solution to her loneliness.

Finding the right one was the challenge. The bunnies she'd brought back tended to get eaten by the creatures who lived near the cottage. Fairy hounds were too rare and too expensive, and required more care than she could manage given her other obligations.

A salamander, though, a salamander only needed occasional feeding. They had a pond near the cottage so it could bathe regularly. And the stone cottage was almost fireproof. The only issue she saw was the copious amount of slime coating the creature. Was it a stress response, or just its natural state?

Wren almost let the creature slip from her grasp as she opened the door. She hurried to close it behind.

"Hello?" she called out.

Nothing but silence answered her.

"Excellent," she murmured.

She put the salamander down in front of the fireplace and piled some kindling in the hearth. Wren lit the pile with a spark of magic and added a few of the logs stacked neatly nearby. The creature wagged its tail and stepped closer to the fire, curling up next to it while making a strange mewling sound Wren took to be contentment.

Before long, the fire crackled merrily and the salamander closed its eyes.

Wren grabbed soap, a towel, and a change of clothes from a small chest near the door and headed to the pond. The slime coated her tunic, but her leather breeches seemed unscathed. Thank the god and goddess. These were her last pair.

She pulled them off and waded into the chilly water with her tunic on. She didn't have much choice—the slime had dried and if she tried to take her tunic off now, it might take a layer of skin with it. As soon as the water loosened the slime, Wren scrubbed it clean and lay it over a rock to dry.

Floating in the water, she let the spring sun warm her. All was right with the world. She had a new friend, it was a beautiful day, and—

A high-pitched shriek sent her floundering around in the pond. She splashed out of the water, grabbed her tunic, and raced back to the cottage, pulling the fabric over her head. Wren rushed into the cottage to find Oriole on top of the table and her new friend hissing sparks at her from in front of the fire.

Her sister's brown eyes found her, and Wren would have sworn her fiery hair grew even more orange in anger.

“What is that”—Oriole gestured rudely at the salamander, and her black wings fluttered in irritation—“doing in the house?”

“My new pet,” Wren said, pouting.

“Salamanders aren't pets.”

“They can be.”

Just then, instead of a spark, a small stream of fire erupted from both from the front and the back of the salamander. The bristles on the broom behind it lit up like the kindling she'd set earlier. Oh, shit.

Wren dashed to the broom and dunked it in the bucket of water they kept near the fireplace for such an event. Maybe not this particular event, but...

“Get that thing outside, now, Wren,” her sister said through clenched teeth.

Wren scooped up the salamander and took it to the pond. Oriole accompanied her, albeit in her small form. Her rainbow light seemed to soothe the creature in Wren's arms. Perhaps Oriole should have approached in her current size rather than as typical fairy size. Shorter than average humans, but still big enough to be threatening to a creature like a salamander.

It skittered off into the water, tail wagging even harder than when Wren had lit the fire. She watched as it disappeared under the rippling surface, sighing as her chance at a pet swam away. Grabbing her tunic from where she left it earlier, Wren whirled on her sister.

“Are you happy?”

Oriole crossed her light brown arms over her chest. “Yes.” Her voice was as tiny as she was at the moment.

She hovered over Wren's left shoulder all the way back. Wren tried to keep her tears to herself, but as soon as she stepped into the cottage, she couldn't fight it anymore. Large tears dripped down her face and off her chin, and Wren threw herself on the bed in the corner.

A warm hand patted her back. "I'm sorry, Wren, but you saw what happened. It would only get worse as it grew. And salamanders are happiest in the water. They get awfully cranky if you keep them dry for longer than a few hours."

"But...but..." Wren wiped her nose on her sleeve. She looked up at Oriole. Would her sister understand?

Third eldest, Oriole never seemed to want for friends, never seemed to mind being alone either. She was adaptable, and Wren feared the same couldn't be true of her. She'd still been young—younger than Rane—when the princess had freed them. More than half her life had been here in this house, or shadowing one or another of her sisters as they performed their duties.

"What is it, chickie?" Oriole asked.

There was nothing in Oriole's face other than concern.

"I'm lonely," Wren admitted. "I know things were bad when the hobgoblin bonded us, but we were together most of the time. Since we've moved here, you all have been busy, everyone with their own duties, and we don't spend enough time together as a family. And since I've come of age, I'm alone all the time. At least when I was younger, I was with someone. Now, it's just me, me, me. You know me—I'm not great company."

Oriole snorted. "Beg to differ, little sister. You are fine company. You know where to find the best berries, and which plants will heal and which will kill. And you're always bringing back surprises. Not all of them as unpleasant as your salamander."

"It wasn't unpleasant. It was just a salamander."

Oriole shivered, and her wings flapped as though to chase away the memory. "An oozy, slimy salamander who almost set our house on fire."

"Fine, maybe a salamander wasn't the best choice, but what am I supposed to do?"

Brushing Wren's hair behind her ear, Oriole hummed while she thought.

“Maybe,” she said after a moment, “I can talk to Lark. There’s a lot of ground to cover, but we should make sure everyone’s needs are addressed. I don’t see why we couldn’t come up with a patrol schedule so you could accompany one of us more frequently.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It would certainly be better than coming home to a burnt husk of a house.”

Wren threw her arms around Oriole, hugging her tight. “Thank you!”

Oriole stiffened for an instant, then relaxed and patted Wren’s back. “I guess we’ve never been good at asking for what we need. I have to go back out for a bit. There’s a few hunters trying to set up camp nearby. Want to come with and give them the usual warnings?”

“Yes!”

“Gear up and let’s go.”

Wren pulled on her breeches, grabbed a leather jerkin, and slid her silver dagger back into its sheath. They found the hunters a half mile away, tents already pitched, and a fire crackling in a ring of stones. Oriole warned them they might not be safe and to avoid unintentionally killing any magical creatures. They would face the judgment of the Queens of Faerie if they did.

The hunters agreed and invited the pixies to dine with them. It was dark by the time their duty was done and their bellies were full. Oriole and Wren zipped back to the cottage, their rainbow lights flickering in the night.

As they passed the pond, Wren landed, growing into her fairy size. Oriole buzzed around her.

“What are you doing, Wren?” she asked with suspicion.

“Just want to say goodbye,” Wren replied. “I won’t be long.”

Oriole squinted at her, as though trying to sense a lie. Wren wasn’t lying. She just needed a little closure. With a nod, Oriole dashed away.

Wren stood at the edge of the pond for a moment.

“Farewell, and may the waters of our Mother keep you safe.”

She turned away, only to catch sight of a pair of eyes glowing in the underbrush several paces away. The ferns rustled, and long gray whiskers and a pair of pointed ears poked out. Wren smiled and crouched, holding out her hand.

“Here, kitty, kitty, kitty.”