



*Oriole*  
by Emily Michel

ORIOLE FOLLOWED THE HIGH-PITCHED KEENING through the undergrowth, pushing aside briars and stepping around the white trunks of the birch trees. The thorns left scratches down her bare arms, but at least she'd been smart enough to wear leather breeches today, though it was the depths of summer and the heat was oppressive. She'd been tempted to go with linen breeches today, but opted for the leather, and her special lightly quilted linen jerkin, leaving her arms bare. Now brilliant red stripes from all the thorns covered them.

The noise was louder to her left. She turned quietly and padded through the forest. Approaching slowly, she kept all her senses on high alert. It wouldn't be the first time some trickster used the sounds of an animal in pain to lure an unsuspecting traveler close. Most would merely steal their food or valuables while they investigated, but a few of the intelligent creatures of the forest would find a human, or a pixie, a tasty snack.

Her job was to keep that from happening. And Oriole took her oath seriously. All of her sisters did, really.

She stopped dead in her tracks when the ferns beneath an old oak rustled, and the keening ceased. She waited patiently. The ferns rustled again, and a low whimper replaced the wail she'd first heard.

Oriole transformed into her small form, shrinking down to a handspan tall, her black wings fluttering wildly behind her. She zipped high into the canopy, looking for anything large that might be luring a snack. She saw nothing...

Wait, there.

Dashing down, Oriole approached the green-furred creature writhing at the roots of the oak. It held a forepaw close to its body, and a large stripe of red on its flank bled freely.

“Oh, you poor thing,” she said without thinking.

The creature, weasel-like with a pig snout and tiny tusks sticking up from its lower jaw, snarled at her. Oriole hovered out of reach, putting her hands on her hips.

“Hush, now. I’m here to help, you daft beastie.”

It snarled again, but when she went nowhere, it lowered its head to the ground. Oriole landed far enough away to not scare it further. It tracked her movements, but put up no resistance.

She approached its head first, holding out an arm for the ramidreju to get a good whiff of her scent. Calm, cool, unafraid. Another whimper escaped from it.

Oriole rummaged in her pockets—her special jerkin was filled with herbs and bandages and sutures and even a few potions in tiny vials. A wearable first aid kit. She pulled out a bit of dried yarrow and applied it to the wound on the flank to stop the bleeding. The ramidreju hissed but made no other sound or movement.

Then she pulled out a pastille. The apothecary in Avora made them, a special blend of willow bark extract, valerian, a little mint, and a lot of sugar to hide the bitter herbs.

“Here you go,” she murmured soothingly, holding out the medicinal candy.

The creature sniffed at it, but didn’t take it.

“Fine.”

Oriole crept closer. It raised its head again and hissed. She tossed the pastille in its open maw. The creature blinked in surprise, but the pixie had thrown true, straight to the back of its throat. Now all she had to do was wait.

She stepped away and sat cross-legged on the ground, allowing the medicine to take effect. Before long, the ramidreju’s eyes drifted shut and its breathing evened out.

After changing into her full size—pixies in their small form were strong for their size, but not that strong—she scooped up the little weasel and hurried home. She grabbed a blanket from a trunk and folded into a small crate Rane had left the last time she and Nevar visited. The little creature was just stirring when she plopped him into the crate.

She stroked his silken fur, and that's when she noticed all the scratches on her arms were gone. The rumors were true—a ramidreju had healing powers. Too bad the gift didn't seem to work on its owner.

The creature—she really needed a name for the blasted thing—leaned into her touch, all its hostility from earlier gone.

“Who’s a good”—Oriole looked—“girl?”

She made a little chirp and settled into the crate. Oriole stood and pattered around the cozy kitchen of the cottage. She warmed some water in the kettle, smashed another pastille to give her new friend an additional dose, and prepped the sutures. The yarrow had helped, but she—Perlita? No—still needed a couple stitches.

Oriole held out a sliver of the pastille, and this time the ramidreju—Rami? A little on the nose—took it. The pixie sat back and waited once more. Before long, the creature was asleep.

She picked it up, cleaned and sewed up the wound, and examined the injured paw. A small thorn was stuck between the pads. Oriole pulled it out with her tweezers, cleaned it, and wrapped the paw in a bandage. It would be fine as long as—Sancha! Nope—left it alone for a day or two.

She was bending over the box to return the creature when her little sister Wren strode in.

“Ooh, what you got there, Orrie?”

Oriole whipped around. Sure enough, Wren’s grimalkin followed her.

“You get that cat out right now. I have an injured animal that I’d like to live through the night.”

Zol chirped, like he was saying, *Who, me?*

“Yes, you. Out. Have a talk with your friend, and make sure he understands this little thing is a friend, not food.”

“But—”

“Now, please.”

“Fine!”

Wren scooped up the large gray cat and hefted him outside.

“Thank you.”

Whatever her sister said in reply was muffled through the door, but Oriole doubted it had been polite. A little more sunshine would hurt neither of them.

The ramidreju stirred briefly, opening her eyes and licking haphazardly at her injured paw and flank, but quickly fell back to sleep. A healing sleep.

Wren and Zol crept back in near sunset, the weasel-like animal still softly snuffling in its sleep. Oriole had cleaned up and prepared a light dinner.

“Is it safe to come in?” Wren asked.

“Did you have a conversation with Eats Anything there?”

Wren rolled her eyes. “Yes. Zol promises to leave the—you never said what it was. And did you name it yet?”

“It’s a ramidreju. And no, nothing I’ve thought of seems to fit.”

“Good, we can come up with names while we eat.”

The grimalkin munched the shredded meat Oriole had left in his bowl while she and Wren sat at the table. Hunks of cheese, some berries, and a loaf of day-old bread sat in the center. Wren grabbed a generous helping of each, and Oriole stacked her favorite blackberries high on her plate.

“What about Ana?” Wren said around a mouthful of cheese.

Oriole shook her head. “That’s not right. I thought Bima might work.”

“We know too many creatures with names starting with B.”

Her sister was right. It seemed to be a theme.

“Lara?” Oriole asked after a moment.

Wren scrunched her nose. “It’s fine, I guess.”

So, not Lara.

Zol finished his dinner and hopped into Wren’s lap, purring and kneading until everything was just right before curling up and falling fast asleep. Wren stroked his fur absentmindedly as they ate.

A little chirp rose from the box. Zol’s ear twitched, but the grimalkin stayed where he was. Oriole walked over to the crate. The ramidreju placed its front paws on the edge, even the hurt one. She was no longer favoring it. The bandage on her flank had a few flecks of blood, but nothing unexpected. It seemed the weasel would be just fine.

Upon seeing Oriole, the creature became animated, making a little “een, een” chirp, almost like a chick. Oriole picked her up, and she crawled up to her shoulder and draped herself around Oriole’s neck. Oriole stroked the little head and smiled.

“What do you think about Yna?” she asked. The ramidreju chirped again and nuzzled Oriole’s chin.

Wren smiled. “It suits.”

Even Zol opened one eye and gave a halfhearted mew.

“Yna it is. You’re welcome to stay as long as you’d like.”

“D’ya think she will?”

A shard of sadness pricked her heart. “I don’t know. She’s a wild creature, and may leave as soon as she’s healed.”

But maybe she’d stay, like Zol had. Or maybe she’d pass through from time to time, like Pyn and Pob, Gita’s dragons, did. Only time would tell, yet the little creature still deserved a name. And her protection. For now, she was part of the family.

