

## A Pixie's Plight

Before she tripped on that stupid, lonely green sock and fell headfirst into a pile of wet clothes, her day was actually going pretty well for once. *Are you kidding me, Wren? Your first day in the mortal world, and this is what you do?* Wren mentally scolded herself as she pulled her upper body out of the unfortunate stranger's clean, albeit sopping wet, laundry basket.

The people around her began to stare as Wren's face grew hot. She quickly exited the laundromat, hoping she wouldn't trip again on the way out. Still, Wren wasn't fully able to feel in the clear until she was at least two blocks away from the unfortunate sock fiasco, so off she went. All she had wanted was some help with directions, and instead she'd gotten a face full of someone else's garments.

Scanning the map in her hand for what seemed to be the hundredth time that afternoon, Wren reminded herself of why she was aimlessly wandering around this nowhere town filled with people she'd been told would torment her, or worse, if they found out what she was.

"Just get the artifact, and your training is complete. Can't be too hard, right? Not like this is the culmination of your entire life's work or anything," Wren whispered to herself as she turned a corner.

It was the right of passage in order to become a Protector. Survive the monstrous, mortal world, find the mystical object that had been hidden by the Council somewhere in the city, and successfully ensure a better life for yourself. While Wren wasn't too sure about the monstrous part, she was sure about one thing: getting that artifact, whatever the hell it may be. Because, if Wren was being honest with herself, she still had no clue what she was even looking for.

Even though she was just a Pixie, since childhood Wren had dreamed of the opportunity to serve as a Protector, defending the veil between her world and that of the mortals, and she was

determined to make that dream a reality. Still lost in her thoughts, Wren unceremoniously bumped into a looming figure while trying to cross a particularly confusing stretch of road.

Wren cast her gaze upward, gearing up for a rushed apology. That was until she saw a crop of all too familiar midnight blue hair, and the obnoxious man such hair was attached to.

“What do you want?” Wren crossed her arms, hoping to gather any shred of dignity she had left after making that scene at the laundromat.

“Just watching you fail... miserably, might I add. So much so that I have come to give you the option of bowing out gracefully. This way you can still face your family when you get home, instead of the alternative where they get to see you humiliate yourself.” Asher’s smug smile spread across his elven features, bleeding his self-imposed superiority. Though the mortals only saw a human man, Wren knew better. Asher was dangerous and far too self-righteous for his own good.

Wren smiled back. “Wow, did you spend all morning on that monologue, or did it come to you in a dream?”

Asher’s upper lip curled back in disgust. He’d always hated Wren for being the only Pixie to ever make it into the elite school for hopeful Protectors. He’d called her every name in the book. Weak, insignificant, a waste of space.

Still, Wren had refused to let him get to her. Instead, his childish taunts had fueled her to do better, to *be* better. And everything had led to this day. Here she would show him who was weak and foolish. Once she found the artifact, of course, but first she had to figure out what it was she was even supposed to be looking for.

“I’m being nice. Don’t make me regret it,” Asher whispered, dropping low to Wren’s ear, so she could hear the enunciation of every word.

Wren didn't have time to waste on Asher, so even though he was blocking her path and she guessed he intended to do so for quite some time, she would make the most of it.

She began to replay the map's contents in her mind amidst Asher's taunts. In reality, it was less a map and more a series of puzzles, each intricately woven to reveal a secret nesting within. But solve one incorrectly and be thrown off course completely. Wren could not afford to make that kind of mistake, not when she had come so close.

Wren had made it to the final puzzle, the ultimate piece that would tell her where the artifact was hidden. The message was quite simple, actually, and spoke of a place where one went to become anew, shedding layers of dirt and grime and being reborn once more.

Once she found this place, Wren would have to complete the second part of the final puzzle. Find something that was no longer whole, winning the hunt. She would finally achieve her life's greatest wish of holding the title of Protector.

*But what could it mean?* Wren was pulled out of her thoughts by green-tinged fingers snapping in her face.

"Hellooooo. Are you listening to me? You should be lucky I'm even wasting my time on you, Pixie," Asher sneered, clearly annoyed that Wren had begun to ignore him.

"Then stop wasting your time, since it's so valuable. Or can you not figure out the final puzzle either?" She knew she had said he wasn't worth her time, but Wren just couldn't help saying something back.

Asher's face grew red. "What I do is none of your concern!" He sputtered.

"Sure, it isn't, you stupid, pointy-eared spoiled brat." Wren was getting ahead of herself. *Now you've done it! He's never going to leave you alone,* she couldn't help thinking to herself as Asher's face contorted with anger.

“You know what, Pixie, I saw your laughable attempt at normalcy in that rundown little laundromat a few blocks back. Maybe you should return there and clean that dirty filth off of you? You reek of ineptitude and a lack of class.”

Wren couldn't help but giggle to herself. *What kind of insult was that?* While Wren was still recovering from Asher's ill-fated attempt at a hard-hitting insult, and Asher still found himself fuming, it struck her.

She hadn't realized it until Asher had made that stupid comment. *Maybe you should return there and clean that dirty filth off of you*, he had said. The puzzle's wording, of becoming something new after cleaning oneself, was not in reference to actual people, but *objects*.

Wren's feet began moving before she even registered what the next step of her plan would be. Asher, catching on quicker than Wren would have liked, trailed behind her.

Slamming the double doors to the laundromat open, Wren skidded to a stop. “Something that's no longer whole, something that's no longer whole...” She repeated to herself, lost in her tumbling thoughts, reminiscent of the swirling clothes that surrounded her on all sides. It was a little dizzying, being so close to achieving what many had thought impossible for a Pixie.

She scanned the massive walls of machinery, the floorboards, even the shelves that housed cleaning products for anything that would fit the description she needed.

Items began to crash around her. Asher was on a rampage, causing the mortals surrounding them to flee in terror. Amidst the wreckage, Wren spotted something green in the corner of her vision that made her hair stand on end. She ran, not caring to check if Asher had seen where she was headed, and dove underneath a broken washing machine to recover one singular sock. A sock that lacked its pair; its other half, some might say.

A loud boom echoed across the remains of what used to be the laundromat, causing Asher to stop in his tracks. The trial was over. Wren had won.

“No!” Asher screeched, making a last-ditch attempt to lunge at Wren. She took a few steps towards her left, and Asher fell face-first into a pile of wet clothes, now covered by a thick layer of dust and rubble.

As the booming chorus of noise still echoed around her, Wren hugged the sock close to her chest, forever thankful that she had tripped that afternoon.