

DIAMONDS IN THE TREES

The air was thin and crisp as the old man arose from his warm bed and rubbed the nights sleep from his deep blue eyes. He quickly readjusted the position of his left foot onto the small oval rug beside the bed when he felt the cold of the stone floor. He muttered a slight utterance of discontent with himself, because he had forgotten to put that large, slightly green log, on the fire as he had planned, before he went to bed last night so it would be warmer this morning.

“Oh well,” he said aloud, “I guess if it were not for the mistakes we make today we would not have a better tomorrow.” Rising to a full stand, he looked out the east window with heartfelt appreciation at the first hint of red glowing on the clouds in the pre-dawn sky. “So many sunrises and just as many settings and I’m still as far from where I want to be as I was when first I started.”

Plumbing is not a commodity he desired “It just makes you lazy and expectant!” He had arranged his quarters so that a small spring would run through and “Thus,” he would exclaim, “running water.”

He drew a bowl of water from the stream and placed it on the stand by the window. The cool water seemed to caress his hands with life and love as he dipped them in and drew it up to wash his wrinkled old face. Almost mirroring some of his finest work, it had magically made all signs of sleep disappear and seemingly replaced it with new vigor and vitality. With so much ability he could easily dispense with this formality, but there are some pleasures in life that “just shouldn’t be trifled with.”

He always slept in his dark blue robe, it was covered with stars and in the center of the back it had a large full moon across which a large graceful dragon flew. It was a constant reminder of a much desired and long missed time. A time when a friend was more than just a word and honor was earned and not expected, a time when chivalry was rampant. When he slept in it, he felt it would take him back for those few fleeting hours of rest, and he often disliked waking only because it brought him from that time to this. Turning to his left and exiting his bedchamber, he slipped off his robe and hung it on the upturned foot long tooth mounted to the right of the door. On the bench just inside the central chamber was the trousers and shirt he had tossed there last night in exchange for his much-loved robe. Pulling them on, he began the day’s work in his mind, first he would feed himself, then he would feed his friends.

His friends were not the kind most people would think. First, there was Gilda, a large black crow, and a constant companion with an uncanny vocabulary, not to mention her unique sense of humor. In her early years she had been almost too mischievous and gotten into nearly too much trouble, if not for her vocabulary, back then, she might not have been here now.

Next was Stinker, a skunk, the name should be self-explanatory. He became part of the old man’s life as the result of a fire a few short years ago. His mother had apparently all she could do to save the rest of the brood, but because Stinker had only one hind leg he couldn’t keep up and was left to burn, or, as life would have it, be found by the old man and despite the stink he put up, be salvaged.

These were the only friends that slept, or even stayed inside. The old man was friends with many; the only friends not in his keeping were of the human species. That's not to say that he couldn't have any, it is more like he chose not to. Humans were the only creatures on the planet that would intentionally inflict pain in the many various ways, not to mention the ways without intent. He knew, unequivocally, they could not be trusted, and trust was imperative in his world.

After conjuring up a quick day-starter for his friends and himself, he decided to go for a walk in the woods. Walking in the woods often helped him to think and he needed to think. This was the first in a long time that Stinker decided not to tag along, Gilda had gone back to sleep and the old man didn't have the heart to awaken her for his own needs, so he ventured off on his own. He tried to walk a different path and direction each time to avoid repetition, but this time his walk would be much different than any other he had taken before, this time the remainder of his life would be changed eternally. As he walked deep in thought, the sun played peek-a-boo through the clouds and the birds sang as they always did. There was a slight breeze sifting through the tall evergreen trees and the squirrels scurried about, cursing in loud chattering tones at the intruder. The air carried the pleasing scent of snow and pine and the old man was so deep in thought that he very nearly didn't notice the sound of an aircraft in trouble overhead. There was smoke trailing one wing and what was obviously the only remaining engine was coughing and sputtering. The craft turned as if it were in a vortex above the old man, and seemed to almost pivot on one wing. He watched as it suddenly went completely silent and began to fall. It fell in large circles as if the steering were stuck in one position. The circles grew smaller and smaller, when it hit the ground it was surprisingly quiet, just one loud bang and it was all quiet again. He rushed over to where it lay, dust and smoke intermingling, the smell was mixed, but the most prominent odor was that of the avgas trickling from the tangled mess. The old man's stomach knotted and rolled when his eyes fell on the inhabitants, children, young children. Without notice the tears poured from his eyes as he frantically sifted through the rubble, mercifully half hoping to find no survivors, in that it would have been over quickly for them. Then a movement, a groan, "Oh merciful God in heaven, what hell hath wrought? Please give me strength." He prayed as he pulled three young people from their restraints, two boys and a girl. He began tending to their wounds though he knew that the boys were too far gone, he had to try. The girl was unconscious but her breathing was normal and what bleeding there was, was minor, her left arm was swollen and probably broken but he had to try to do what he could, within normal parameters, for the boys. He worked for what seemed to be an eternity, first pressure here, then a wrap and gauze there, using what he could salvage from the plane's first aid kit. Suddenly one stopped breathing and the other had to be ignored, until it became obvious that he would never restart on his own. As the old man regretfully let the one go and turned to the second, a long deep sigh was emitted from him, what little life was there just left. Disappointed, exhausted, and heartbroken he turned his attention to the girl, all the while he worked he was half afraid that this too would be for naught. When he had done all that he could, within normal parameters, he took care of the other inhabitants, giving them the best of his abilities. There were only five adults, which made the old man curious enough to look through all of the contents he could find. In a large black metal box were the answers to some of his questions and the

beginning of a new dilemma. The box was locked and was of heavy fireproof construction and took a little “extra effort” to open.

“Desperate times, desperate measures.” He uttered, looking at the girl to be sure she was still unable to see. When the box was opened, it yielded files and documents, all of which explained that these children were orphans and were being transferred to a larger institution on the east coast for financial reasons. Of the adults, there was one nurse and two child-care workers escorting the children. The other two adults were the remains of what were obviously pilots.

He gathered up the girl, the box and all of himself that was left and wearily made his way back to his home, or as he and Gilda affectionately referred to it, “The Lair”.

Special preparations were necessary when they arrived as he had had no guests in a very long time, and especially no females had graced his humble abode for far longer than even he would care to express. There has got to be separate sleeping quarters, she will have to be apart from the central chambers, for her privacy, but yet on the south end for the southern light exposure and away from the winter drafts. As for a bed, queen size for a queen, that thought brought about a pleasant smile. If memory serves right, girls like frilly things, so a large canopy would be in order.

The old man had been so busy settling in his guest he had not noticed that the sun was nearly down, the gray clouds were shining with a gold and silver highlight and the evening air seemed to be fresher than before.

“Gilda,..Gilda?” He yelled from the girl’s room. Again, “Gilda, come in here, I’m far too busy to come to you right now!”

“Click”, “Click”, “Click”. Almost with a musical rhythm, her claws on the stones announced her arrival in the doorway.

“What sort of game are you playing now? Why are you walking, are you trying my patience?” Puffed the old man as he scurried about the room readying it for the girl’s awakening.

“Like you, I think better when I walk, so I walked.” The voice rolled from the large bird in deep tones as if from a long empty barrel.

“And just what did you have so pressing on your mind that you had to walk it out?” Asked the old man with a prompted smile nearing laughter.

“Well... I do not wish to rain on your picnic, but it concerns me that you may be growing senile. After all of these years, I am afraid that you have finally cracked your pot.” Gilda replied first tilting her head one way then the other.

“What? Because I bring an injured little girl back from my walk, you think my pot is leaking?” He asked, almost baiting the conversation.

“That is only the first turn of the glass.” She began. “Do you not remember why you avoid people?”

“Oh Gilda, my dear friend, Gilda,” he sighed. “Yes I do remember.” He stopped what he was doing, walked to the doorway where Gilda still stood, sat on the stone floor next to her and with reddened eyes pushing back the tears he explained. “There was a plane wreck, in the woods. It was full of children, at least ten. Besides the obvious two pilots, there were three adults; one nurse and two child care workers, none of them survived. I tried to save two others, but I failed, this was the only one to live. The papers in the plane told me that these children were all unwanted by their families for whatever

reasons, I believe that this girl has had enough rejection in her young life, and that to send her back would be inhumane.”

Gilda walked the short distance between them, climbed up on his leg, and perched on his knee, and asked in a sympathetic voice, “But what of when she awakens, what will you tell her and how will you explain you, me, Stinker, The Lair, and everything you have fought so hard to keep secluded and hidden?”

“I guess I’ll have to deal with all of that as it presents itself, right now we have to make certain that this little one is safe and in good health. There have been things like this happen to people and when they awoke, they could not remember a thing, not even so much as their name.”

“I know of what you speak, and I also know that in some cases the mind awakens later to a full memory. However, what plans have you should she awaken unaffected in her mind and wishes to return to what she remembers? What then? Are you ready for the pain again?” Gilda interrupted with her head high and eyes wide.

“Trust me, my old companion, she will not wish to leave, and I truly hope her mind is unaffected. Now I must insist that you not give away your true self to her until I am sure of her. Promise me.” He baited. “Promise me, you must promise me.” He demanded in a slightly louder voice. He knew better than to yell at her, that would only provoke her and she could be far more obstinate than could he be persistent.

“If you insist, but you know how these things always turn out.” She responded spreading her long wings and taking flight into the central chambers and squawking a loud “caw” like most ordinary crows would.

“Gilda!” He yelled in aggravation. “Gilda, you did not promise and you must! Do you hear me? You must!” He demanded again.

In a near whisper and a defiant tone, Gilda heeded his wishes once again. “Oh alright, I promise.” Followed nearly inaudibly by a muttered “But don’t blame me if this turns out to begin a habit of lying.” He heard her ruffle her feathers and nestle in for a nap.

For the first time in many long years the old man stayed awake all night, placing everything in perfect order so when she awakened fear would be the farthest from her mind. When all that could be, was done, he sat on the chest at the foot of her bed wondering what he’d forgotten, how old she was, which of the six girls she was, when her birthday was, and on and on. Until the first glint of sunlight careened off from the crystal angel on the corner of the chest of drawers and struck him dead center right eye. Knee-jerk squint, and a quick check, “She is still out.” He mumbled as he pulled himself up and turned to leave the room. He heard the bedding rustle and turned to see large bright olive green eyes looking into his own, nearly paralyzing him. Seemingly frozen in place the old man searched desperately the depths of his mind for the first thing he had forgotten, the right thing to say when she did awaken. It seemed an eternity passed until the silence in the early morning air was broken by the child’s soft voice as she greeted him with a simple “G’ mornin’.”

His heart hit new levels and he felt for the first time in ages a new purpose for living.

“And a good morning it is. How are you feeling?” He asked returning to the chest from where he had just risen.

“My arm hurts, and I gotta headache.” She responded.

“Well your arm is fine, it will hurt for a while, but it’s only bruised and I think your headache will go away shortly after you eat something, what would you like?” He asked.

“Do you got some cereal? I like Cocoa Stars!” She answered. “No, I don’t think we have any cereal, but would you like some eggs, bacon, milk and juice?” He inquired with slightly raised eyebrows.

“Will you eat with me?” She asked.

“Only if you tell me your name and promise to tell me about yourself.” He countered.

“Deal, my name is Wendy, but I like Winnie. What’s your name?” She asked.

“My name is Mervin, you may call me Merv if you like.” He answered.

“I gotta pee!” Short, but to the point, she caught him off guard, and unprepared, again.

“Oh my, I guess we’d better do something about that, hadn’t we.”

Stalling for time yet realizing the impending urgency he turned and rose to his feet in one move, all the while directing her attention to the light pink robe hanging on the rose-fashioned hanger above the night stand to the left of her head seemingly to grow from the bedpost. He exited the room in somewhat of a hurry, closing the door behind him and at that instant Gilda took advantage.

“Welcome to parenthood! This is only the beginning, and you thought this a good idea.” She mocked and laughed but not loud enough to be heard through the door. Quick work, some of this, one of those, and the central closet is now a potty fit for any princess. Open mouth, pointed finger, scolding ready for Gilda and the door opens behind Mervin in good time to cause slight stuttering as he wheeled around to take a little hand and guide it to the room of need. Gilda’s eyes narrowed mockingly and she ruffled her black shiny feathers. No more had the door closed and Mervin turned to light into Gilda, than did it open again and a near dancing Winnie exclaimed, “I gotta have paper.”

“Oh my, yes, what am I thinking?” Mervin said all the while returning to the room and reaching on a high shelf where she could not see, he produced her request and promptly exited to the central chambers in time to see Gilda flying erratically out the window and bursting with laughter once outside.

Tying the petite gold rope to close the robe as she closed the door behind her, she was pleased to see Mervin setting a place for her at the closest end of a long and somewhat tall table at the far end of the central chambers. Not more than three steps and the old man set the first rule into play.

“We leave the door open to let everyone know the room is vacant.” He softly advised as she turned quickly around, returned, and opened the door and carefully made sure it stayed full open.

He helped her into her chair, handed her a napkin, and poured her milk. Not a word spoken, until he was through and turned toward his chair at the other end of the long table.

“Thank you.” Soft and sincere.

“You are welcome, and I thank you for honoring me with your presence at the table today.” He responded to which a slight giggle escaped her over taxed efforts of containment. They talked and ate, he ate little (as usual), and for so little, she did not.

He was still trying to think of a good way to start when she beat him to it.

“Where are we?”

“This is my home, I have for many years called it “The Lair” Do you like it?” He answered and got in a quick one of his own.

“It’s kinda big, but I think I like it. What’s a “Lair”?”

“That is what people called the place where dragons would nest and return to for safety and sanctuary.” Before he could even formulate his next question she sat blot upright, eyes so wide he thought they may pop out and asked in a much excited voice, “Are there any dragons coming here?”

He had already swallowed or for sure, he’d have chocked, and with an uncontrollable grin, he quelled her excitement by explaining, “Dragons are all gone now, they have been for a very long time, I only call this place that in their memory.”

Her eyes returned to normal as she picked up a piece of toast and leaned back in the large chair to nibble on it. They talked much more than he thought they would, and it went much easier than he thought it would. She did not know her parents, but always wanted to, or at least know what it would be like to have parents. Her birthday had been celebrated on different days each year, sometimes with another child to cost less, and other times just because there was money for it now, none the less, she knew she was seven and she hadn’t had a birthday this year. She guessed it might be on Christmas this year, cause here “aint no money” again and it’s cheaper that way. As far as going back was concerned, she may have edged that out when she said that she fell asleep on the ride to the airport, woke up long enough to get buckled in, and thought they flew her to this new home. She did think it “kinda odd” that this home had only one parent. The embarrassment of the related questions was spared as Gilda flew in the window and perched herself on the back of a chair at mid-table. Knowing how this would affect the unsuspecting little girl, the old man with palms up and arms extended full length rose to a stand and announced with a half-bow, “Allow me to introduce my best long time friend, Gilda, Gilda please say ‘hello’ to our new friend, Winnie.”

“Hello!” Gilda said politely and obediently.

“It talked!” Winnie shrilled through a large grin.

Gilda’s eyes narrowed slightly; she lowered her head and began to turn toward Winnie when Mervin quickly refereed by explaining;

“Of course she did, and she is a ‘she’ as are you, and not an ‘it’, she is easily offended, but can be the best friend ever.”

“I’m sorry.” Winnie offered with a face flushed with embarrassment. “Can she say more?”

“I think you will find that our in good time, but if you really want to know about her, you should ask her.” Said Mervin, as he gestured toward Gilda. “I think it is time you get cleaned up, get dressed and get ready for your first day at this, your new home, that is, if you would like it to be.” He added with a look of question in his raised eyebrow.

Winnie slipped down from her chair, pushed it back up to the table (with some effort) and returned to her room without response. She was obviously in thought, but not so deep that it prevented her from taking a curious glance at Gilda on her way. While she was in her room preparing herself, the old man took care of the breakfast mess and conversed with Gilda. Each correcting the other, they began a new relationship with child rearing as the main theme and readjusted their individual interests in order to unite in a common effort for the best of the household as a whole. They both knew, and agreed

that there would occasionally be differences, but that they would do their level best to work together. What had been secret up until now would remain secret until they both agreed that the time was right. Many things had to be done, and quite possibly, some undone, but time is one thing that they both knew very well and had had plenty of.

“Most things done quickly are mostly as quickly, undone.” Gilda would say.

They were just discussing the problems that ‘having a girl in the house’ could bring about, when the door opened again announcing her return. She had dressed in jeans, tennis shoes, and a long sleeved checkered shirt...no socks. Her light brown hair was pulled back and put as neatly into a shoulder-length ponytail as a seven year old could be expected to put it. She stood in the doorway waiting for their comments, and it did not take but a couple of seconds.

“Well Gilda, see, I told you she was smart enough to choose well.” Mervin quipped complimentarily, to which Gilda reserved comment.

“Is this o.k.?” She asked, uncertain.

“Yes, that’s just fine.” Mervin answered, thinking, but not saying, “although, I would have worn socks.” He walked over to her extending his right hand, which she placed her left hand in, and he led her through the central chambers and down the corridor on the north side. Talking and walking he asked her;

“If you could choose, which day of the year would you make your birthday?”

“Oh, I really don’t know, there are so many and birthdays are so fun, I think I might wish they all could be, all but Christmas.” She answered.

“Well then, lets say any day that is not already taken by a holiday or other important event. Then which one might you choose?” He asked again, knowing all the while that where he was leading her would answer his question with much less deliberation. They entered a large room filled with curious things, things on stands, in cases, things on shelves and things suspended on strings, things seemingly everywhere. She did notice, but did not mention that the room was round, and seemed to be much taller than the rest of the house. Her eyes darted around the room as if she were trying to see everything at once, and stopped only when they halted in front of a large round table. It was standing on only one central leg that was spiral, large at the bottom and top but very narrow in the middle. The tabletop was made of stone with several circles dividing its circumference into differing sized circles, each independent of the other, yet, somehow connected. The outer circle had strange pictures engraved in it with writing that she did not understand, each were separated into rectangular divisions. The next circle had just pictures like a crab and a horse with wings, there were so many and it looked like it could be such fun to play with. He let go of her hand and she put both of her hands on the outer circle of the table and looked up at him without moving. Looking back into her eyes and knowing all the while of the temptation that she must be fighting, he instructed her.

“Face the table and close your eyes.” When she had done as he had instructed, he continued. “Think of your birthday and try to think of what kind of day it should be, think of how old you are and who you would like to be there. When you have all of that done, spin the wheel hard as you can to your right and raise your hands, but do not open your eyes until I tell you to do so.”

Following his directions was only easy up to the ‘ who you want to be there’ part, for some reason she could not see anyone but the old man, Gilda, herself, and silly as it

was, a skunk. Unable to see anything else, she spun the wheel hard. She could hear it spinning, she even thought she felt a wind from it. Not opening her eyes was not so hard, she liked surprises and had practiced that part before. Oftentimes she would play alone and pretend she would have a surprise party, keeping her eyes closed was very important then. With her eyes closed, she often dreamt of the wondrous gifts would receive and she would seem to have them as long as her eyes were closed. This time was different, though, this time she kept seeing only the one picture she started with and it did not change. The wheel spun quietly, but like all things, slowed to a stop. Only then did the old man's voice break her thoughts.

"You may open your eyes now." He said, looking studiously at the table.

When she opened her eyes and looked at the table again, all of the pictures seemed to have changed places, and some of them had changed to different pictures. Now the largest picture on the wheel was one of a lady in a long dress that covered her feet and she had a blindfold on, before it was a big bull. This brought about a pleasant smile. She looked up at the ole man and asked excited, "Can I do it again?"

"No, once is quite enough for now. This gives me more than enough to do for now." He answered.

"What does it mean?" She queried.

"For now, this only means that your birthday has not yet come this year, it is on October eleventh and you are in fact seven, soon to be eight. What would you like for your birthday?" He asked, distracting any further questions.

"Anything I want?" She asked as he led her gently toward the door.

"Well, anything within reason." He answered.

"What if I said I want to have only one home and my own family?" She asked looking more at her feet now, as they walked, as if in doubtful anticipation.

"What sort of home would you like?" He asked, knowing not to ask a question that could yield an undesired answer.

"Well, I have been in a lotta nice homes, and I liked most of em. But they all had other kids and they decided that they didn't really want more. I think I want one with no other kids, kinda like this one." She said, lifting his heart one rung higher, unexpectedly.

"Do you mean like this one, but not this one?" Again, he played with undesirable questions.

"This one is just like the one I want, but..." She trailed off in deep hesitation.

"This is your home if you wish, for as long as you wish, but you must be completely honest and straight forth with me always. Now what is your concern?" He prodded.

"You won't be mad?" She asked.

"I do not think I will be mad, but I can not make promises about the unknown. You talk to me and I will try to react as well as I can." He responded.

"Okay, but if you get mad, can I still stay here?" She pleaded.

"Winnie, You may stay here as long as you like, no matter what you say or do. I told you this is your home if you like and I will not go back on that, I promise." He reassured.

"Well, its just that you're, you know, you're....." She stumbled again.

"I am what, Winnie, not married?" He attempted.

“Oh no! I didn’t even think of that, it’s just that you’re so, so old.” She forced it out.

“Why would that bother you?” He asked.

“Most old people don’t like little kids, and they yell at ‘em a lot.” She explained.

“I will not promise not to yell at you, but I will tell you that I am not like most old people, and I enjoy children far more than I do big people. Children are so full of life and have so very much to offer in life, old people are more concerned with how much they can gain than what they can give. Please do not compare me to those you have known, and give me a chance to be the one you would like to know.” He implored.

“But that’s not all, old people always die, what if you die, then I’ll be alone again.” Finally, she dropped the big one.

“Oh, my!” He exclaimed with eyes wide. He stopped walking now, turned to her, bent down on one knee and placed his hands on her waist. He looked deep into her big worried green eyes, and he said, “My dear sweet Winnie, I cannot promise you promises that I cannot keep. I cannot tell you of things I do not know. When I do tell you something, believe it, because I know it, and if I promise, it will be. Death is something of great uncertainty and I would be more concerned that you would leave me, than I would of me leaving you. Can you promise me you will not die and leave me?”

“No, I don’t think so.” She answered, looking back with concern.

“Then, would it be any more fair for one of us to promise such a promise than the other?” He asked.

“No, I don’t think so, but would you try really hard not to go away and leave me?” She requested.

“I will do all that I can to be with you as long as I can, and when I do die, I will be with you as long as you live. You will know this when the time comes, I do promise.” He asserted, and embraced her, and at that moment, they both knew this to be true.

The rest of that day was a day of interest and trial as the little family began to nestle in together. They even went for a walk in the woods where she met Stinker, and they became good friends. They enjoyed each others company long into the evening and when she went to bed that night, sleep came more easily to her than it had in most of her young life.

Sleep was neither needed nor desired by Mervin and Gilda. They spent that night in the north chamber working together and talking. There was much to do before, now there was much more to do and it did not look like the list of chores would lessen for quite some time to come. Their workload was heavy but neither of them minded, as a matter of fact, the new load was more welcome than either of them had expected. They talked as they worked. The conversations were of such pleasurable nature that Gilda forgot herself, for a bit and as she had done for to long ago, she became mischievous enough to get the old man laughing in fits. She had attempted to extract an old experiment from a large jar with first one foot, when her foot became stuck. In an attempt to free that foot, her other foot slipped right in next to it and became just as tightly jammed. The old man thought this humorous enough to watch and laughed near to fits when her beak became stuck as well and the jar fell on its side and began rolling around on the floor. Just the sight was enough, but the icing on the whole cake was the loud squawking and mumbling she emitted as she struggled and fought. He laughed so

hard and long, for awhile he thought he might wake Winnie. It took three attempts to finally come to her aid, on the first two she made him laugh so hard that he had to sit down and wipe tears from his eyes, the third time may only have succeeded because by then she was too tired to move and had already made every comment and plea she could think of. When it was all over and they had caught their breath, they both appreciated that they had not had such a good time in such a long time and they agreed it was about time. Nonetheless, Gilda utterly refused to do it again just to see if it would be as funny twice.

They all sat down to breakfast again together when Winnie awoke the next morning. Gilda, in attempt to repair any damage done in their last conversation, offered the first; “Good morning, Winnie. I trust you slept well.”

“Yep! I think so.” She answered turning to Mervin to ask; “Is it okay if Stinker sleeps with me? He keeps my feet warm.”

“Stinker will sleep where he likes, and if it pleases you, then, yes he may.” He answered with a smile.

The morning meals were the highlights in their lives for years yet to come. They all enjoyed the conversations in the early morning hours when the air was most fresh and still, and the thoughts were new and uninhibited. Sometimes they would discuss the dreams of the prior nights sleep. Winnie’s dreams always seemed to be of most particular interest to Mervin. The only dreams that seemed to bother them both were the ones with dragons. Mervin did not know for sure whether they came about because of things he had said or if they were of a more delicate origin. Trying not to draw too much attention to them, he would listen closely and prod only with much discretion. Most often, he would be able to distract her mind and help her to forget, or at least, put aside her dreams.

Mervin saw to it that a portion of each day was devoted to education and he tried to keep it done in such a way that it did not resemble school. He wanted her to enjoy learning, and to grow a near consuming hunger to know anything new. For the most part, she was compliant, but as is with most children, there were those days where fun and distraction were far easier to attend than learning. He most enjoyed answering her questions, they gave him confidence that she had not given up and his job was going where he wanted. Although, some questions were unanswerable, as yet, and would take strong divisionary tactics, questions such as; “How come Gilda is a girl and talks like a man?” or, “How old are you?” But the toughest one so far was; “How come you never have to go to the store?” That was the first time he had truly wished Santa Clause would knock on the door. He knew most certainly it would keep coming up, and he began immediately to formulate a plan for the explanation. It was not in him now, nor would it ever be, the ability to lie. He not only would not, but he could not.

The family had grown close and contented over the next few years, and Winnie had learned a great many things. Her education had become one of her strongest interests and often she had wanted more when Mervin was ready to stop for the day. She had outgrown more clothes than she had worn out, and Mervin knew that if he kept the clothes in her wardrobe changing to her size and liking, she would know soon that something was not normal. She did confront him, before he had formulated his plan to conceal this little detail. It was on her twelfth birthday when she had opened her closet to the new clothes, which were almost exactly as she had described them on the day before,

that her growing mind would not accept the 'Birthday Fairy' any longer. She knew he had neither made nor bought them. Dressed in her prettiest dress she presented herself to the breakfast table. As it was done on all her prior birthdays, as soon as she was seated at her place Gilda's birthday greetings were right on queue.

"Good morning, and a very happy birthday, Winnie." Gilda said with wings at full extension.

"Good morning, and I thank you very much." Winnie responded smiling and bowing her head in reverence.

"Good morning, and I also wish you a very happy birthday. I see you found things to your liking." Mervin chimed in with a coy smile.

"Yes, yes I did. And I thank you, they are, as always, wonderful." She responded with a pleasant smile and a gracious bow in his direction as well.

It was when she failed to ask questions or began new conversations of any sort that he knew something was amiss.

"Is there something troubling you?" He asked, unaware she had laid the trap well, and it would prove to be only the first of many to come.

"Yes, there is, but I am not sure of it's importance just as yet." She intentionally set him to prod, and knew full well he would. He had taught her to know well that if you open a door, you should be responsible for the consequences derived, as well as for closing that door. Now he was about to open the door to Pandora's Box, and little did either of them know then, this would only be the first of many yet to come.

"Well..... let us not linger too long on unpleasantries on this, your birthday. Please let me know what troubles you, and I will do everything I can to relieve the burden. What can it be?" He fell, just as she knew he would.

"I have noticed that every year on the day before my birthday, either you or Gilda would ask what I would like. I always tell you, and I always get exactly what I ask for." Gilda's eyes widened and she turned her back to the table. Mervin put down the fork he had been holding and clasped his hands prayer-like in front of him. Quietly with his elbows on the table, he shifted slightly in his chair. "I do not wish to seem unthankful, I do honestly appreciate all of my gifts, but I know you have no time on the night before to rush anywhere to buy them, return and put them away for me to find them the next day. You have taught me not to look a gift-horse in the mouth, but I am no longer able to believe in the 'Birthday Fairy.' Would you please, this time answer my question without bringing up something else, or rushing off to do more of your secret work in the north chamber? I am thankful, but you have taught me to ask questions and expect answers, even if I know I won't like them, I believe this question deserves to be answered." She insisted.

He was uncomfortable, and it was obvious. He knew this time would come, he just thought he would have more time. This girl not only grew too fast, but she learned just as quickly, if not more so. His mind was racing and his thoughts were beginning to jumble. He sat motionless and in deep thought for a short while, knowing he must answer her, but is now the time? No, she had grown and learned well, she obviously knew something was amiss and redirection would only breed distrust at this point. If he were to face this, he would not do it alone.

"Gilda, turn around here if you please and bear this with me if you will. The time is come." He directed.

“ So it would seem, I will help where I can, but this is your burden, you asked for it, now you may bear it.” She was blunt and left no room for argument.

Mervin felt a slight anticipatory exhalation at finally getting this out in the open. It is good that she is of age to ask, now it may be she will also understand. What better timing than on a birthday? A day of joy and it would bring her joy to know this great secret and to be entrusted with it. Both he and Gilda sat poised to confront and explain, Winnie arose and excused herself to the ‘little room’, which gave breathing room and time to get the beginning in the proper place. When she returned, Mervin began.

“What I am about to tell you must never, and I repeat NEVER be repeated neither by anyone, nor to anyone! Do you understand?”

“I only understand that you wish it kept secret, but that is all I can understand of it until you tell me what it is.” She answered, now brimming with suspicion.

“Until this day, Winnie, I have never requested a promise from you, and you know the severity of a promise do you not?” He asked.

“Yes, I do, and I will promise not to utter a word without your permission. Now will you please tell me what is so secret?” Her natural feminine curiosity was about to burst her seams.

“This is a long and detailed story, so bare with me.” He began. “Many, many years ago, when times were tough and people had no form of government to speak of, they put their faith in landowners and noblemen and put one in charge of managing their worlds, this one they referred to as a King. Some were much more trustworthy than others and some wiser than others. In the time that I am speaking of, there was one particular king who was, I believe, superior to them all. His name was Arthur; I believe to this day that Arthur was the wisest and most fair of all the Kings. He made his share of mistakes, as do we all, he lived up to and admitted his mistakes. He was very evenhanded and did not believe in unwarranted punishment. Arthur was not only the best King, but I believe that he was the greatest man ever to grow out of boyhood. He did not always rule, not as most would say, but sometimes he would be ruled, this is what he believed made him better than his predecessors.”

“Some great king many long years ago! What has this to do with my question, is this just another one of your stories to avoid answering the question at hand?” Winnie interrupted impatiently.

“Winnie, you asked me a question, if you do not wish to hear my answer, please just say so now. It will be far the easier for me to stop now. However, if you must know, then patience must be your payment to learn the lesson you ask for.” He corrected.

She had learned in earlier dealings that if he began his answer with her name, it would most often mean she would be wise to pay heed. This in mind, she politely bowed her head in reverence and apologized. “I am sorry, please tell me more.”

“As a boy,” He continued, “ Arthur was different than most. He held fair play to be very important, as a matter of fact, he made a point of challenging most often the ones he knew would cheat. He would do so in order, not only to better himself, but also to teach them the lessons they most often deserved and hoped that they would see the error in their ways and set themselves straight. Oftentimes, it did work, in some cases it would only serve to challenge their hand at deriving more reliable cheating strategies. As they grew, Arthur grew very good in most of their contests, and as a result, he was most often the first choice when they chose their teams and co-players. Most often, he would wait

until everyone was chosen and then he would trade sides with the weakest member of the opposite side, always trying to wind up on the weakest side for the challenge and fair play. He had even been known to be overthrown by an opponent of lesser ability, but not without a good fight. This would help build their confidence, as he had been known to say. He was loved by nearly everyone, although through his life I learned that even the most loveable would not be loved by all. Do not misunderstand me, Arthur had his misgivings, for one, he was very hardheaded. If he were to set on something, nothing, not even the depths of failure would turn him from it. It took him three years to train a horse that he was told was itself too hardheaded and nil-minded to be trained proper. He did train it, and he trained it well, and then he turned it out to pasture never to be burdened by humankind again.

“Why would anyone go to all that trouble only to undo it again?” Winnie could not help herself, she was compelled to ask.

“Fair play.” He answered. “He believed that the horse had earned his freedom after all it had endured. In completion of training they had both won a fair prize, Arthur had completed what he set out to do, and the horse had earned its just deserts.”

“Maybe the horse did not wish to be set free, how did Arthur know what the horse wished?” She asked.

“He had said that he believed that the horse was neither nil-minded, nor hardheaded, but rather competitive, after the games were through neither would have need to compete with the other again.” He went on. “As Arthur grew older, his sense of fair play and honesty grew with him. They became a large part of him and his life, more a way of life with him. He had been in a good many confrontations, just because he could not stand by in the face of foul play. One day he came upon three men thrashing a fourth. The odds being as they were, he jumped right in on the largest of the three. The two of them bested the three and when all was done, he found that the three were on the one because he was a bully and had thrashed the three individually for no good reason. Finding this truth, he thrashed the bully and learned a lifelong lesson. To that he had said, ‘I now know the waters before one should dive in, lest one should bump one’s head, or enter unkindly waters at best.’ He did learn on that day to make certain on which side to stand, before making the stand at all.”

“Arthur grew straight and tall, and his wits grew keen and quick. He learned that everyone was capable of being loved, as well as of giving love, and that each had their own way of expressing it as well. He grew to be a much loved and admired King, not to mention the respect of even those who, for their own reasons, did not love, nor like him. In his time there were a great many evils and dangers, which he faced with much courage, often even returning home severely wounded. One of the greatest dangers he had faced most often was the many magicians and the evils that they could, and often did create. Arthur faced their evil and sorcery for a very long time without aid of neither magic nor the craft, but he was losing ground slowly and steadily. That which comes from the conjuring, incantations, and potions mixed of evil and death, can only be rid of by those who hold and know the powers. He had in his service, a man who had watched him come into this world, entertained him on numerous occasions, taught him philosophies unknown elsewhere, and, as well, loved him as he would have his own son, had he had one. This man had long practiced the craft and had known a great many things that most of the evil ones had no time to dabble with. Despite his abilities, Arthur

had forbid the use for anything more than entertainment, ‘Use it now, use it again and always. It bodes evil and harm.’ He would say. ‘What is conjured here is come from elsewhere and that lacking must be made good. If you know not from whence it comes, how then do you make restitution to where you know not?’ He would ask. The sorcerers and magicians of the time had learned to conjure up demons, which could fly the skies and prey on the villages, their people and their farms. Some breathed fire on the crops and left nothing but starvation and hunger in their wake.”

“Dragons! You mean Dragons?” Winnie interrupted again, high excitement in her voice. “I thought there were no such thing as dragons.”

“Oh my! Yes there were. At one time there were a great many, and a great many different kinds.” He explained. “So many long years have passed that people would much rather believe in things that have not yet happened than what has already passed. There were dragons with feathers, and some of leathery skins so thick it could not be penetrated with the strongest lance. There were dragons so great they had to hide in the mountains to sleep and some so small that they would fit into a sewing box. Not all would breathe fire, but when they did begin to, that is when Arthur enlisted the aid of his magician friend. He could not battle the fangs, fire, long tails, and claws this became too much for even he. ‘From your skills they come, and it would seem, so shall they go.’ He had said”

“Who was his friend?” Winnie wriggled in her seat as she asked.

“His friend was a man known as Merlin, a magician who had tried to only use his skills and powers for good. He had made his mistakes during his apprenticeship, as do most magicians, that is when he decided to do for humankind, instead of against. That is what pit him and Arthur on the same side, they stood for the same causes and believed in the same principals.”

“Did he beat the dragons, all of ‘em and save Arthur from getting burned up?” She asked.

II

“No, he did not beat all of them, Arthur killed some, and there were a few good sorcerers and magicians still who had helped him do them in, but the dragons killed their share of magicians as well. Some of the other kingdoms had killed magicians in opposing lands in hopes that dragons would overrun them and then they could be more easily conquered. Some kings had magicians and sorcerers beheaded in attempt to stop the recreation of the beasts. They were times filled with much confusion and chaos, were it not for Arthur and his kind, I am certain things would be very different today.” He said.

“ And Merlin, don’t forget Merlin helped.” Winnie added.

“No, we cannot forget Merlin. You see, just as did Merlin help Arthur in those times, so does he wish to help you in these times.” He smiled an uncontrollable smile and looked away, now awaiting an expected response.

“ What do you mean? Help me? How can he help me? He’s gotta be dead by now, he can’t do anything for me,....can he?” She asked, now more puzzled than ever before.

His hands were together at the fingertips and wrists, palms cupped and arms extended toward the center of the table. He waited until he was certain her eyes were on

them, then he opened them palms up now exposing before her, Gilda, who had just been perched quietly to her right, and was now squawking a loud caw as she flew back to her perch and complained; “How embarrassing, you know I do not like to be your pigeon.”

With eyes near wide enough to pop and a smile that nearly consumed the rest of her face, Winnie gasped; “How did you do that?”

“It is not so much ‘how’ I did it, as it is that I ‘did’ do it.” He began his revelation, “You see, ‘I’ am Merlin.”

“That is not possible. How can you be? You are not old enough.” Now doubtful, and confused.

“There are so many others who would agree with you.” He began. “While I was in service to Arthur, I came to love him so very much that I worked both night and day in effort to do all that I could for him. At first, it was just little things, I would lighten his workload around the castle in every way I could without his notice. I would effect repairs to the walls, and keep things up that time and battles would tear down. Things like the time the corner guard-tower had begun to tumble into the moat. I was near when it happened, a few well placed words and gestures and it was back in place, good as the day it was built, before it even became wet.”

“Believe him, Winnie, he is who he says he is. Not only that, but he was far more instrumental than his modesty allows him to tell.” Gilda chimed in, informatively. “There were a good many times that would have gone a skew had it not have been for the deeds and doings of Merlin. Tell her of Moranda, and do not be so bashful about it, it would do her good to hear of it and you good to remember it.”

“Oh yes, Moranda...” Merlin trailed off reminiscently. “Yes,” he continued with a slight shine of memories in his eyes. “Moranda was a long lost friend, a one time apprentice of mine. A good one at that, I might add. It took me little time to teach her, she was a quick study and learned as if she had already been in practice. I was a long time invested in perfecting what I thought, might be some day a good study, and hoped, as good a wife as well. She was a short woman, about five foot even, the most bewitching clear shiny green eyes sparkled from a face that could only be fashioned by angles. She wore her shiny black hair ever neat, clean and sweet smelling to the back of her knees. Her voice still echoes in my ears, the voice given only to one alive, all others who had even a likeness unto it before or since were of heavenly domain. She was always the essence of grace, oftentimes I thought that even time and space stepped aside when she walked. Her touch was ever and always deliberate and feminine, I often thought she could quell rebellions with a simple touch. Her grace and femininity never waived, even in her most stressed times. Never was she a suitor for royalty, but always and ever suited for it. I loved her, as I have never before nor ever since, loved any other, nor, do I believe will I ever again. I taught her a great many things, some were known only to me, and some only successfully achievable to this day, by myself. I could go on endlessly speaking only good things of her, but she did do the cardinal wrong in the realm of mystics and magicians, she stood unprepared in opposition to her master. She and I had been apart for about three years over an unceasing dispute over the creation and control of dragons.”

“You could create dragons?” Winnie asked.

“Yes, we both could...and did. I learned that in so doing, we were toying far too heavily with the balance of nature and we had to stop before we destroyed all of creation.

She, on the other hand, was certain that we could balance nature much like you would an egg on your forehead. We could. But, much like the egg, it too could slip, and again like the egg, when it would fall, irrevocable damage, possibly annihilation. Then who would rebalance the frail tides of nature?" He answered, yet leaving much unanswered.

"What did she do?" Winnie asked impatiently.

"Moranda had come to visit one night and I was foolish enough to believe it was I she wished to visit and that she wished to repair our lost relationship. I bid her into the castle, I was so taken with her that deceit was not even a consideration. I looked into her eyes and saw only what I wished to see, and what she wished me to see. We spent the entire night enjoying one another's company and forgetting that there ever was a yesterday, or ever would be a tomorrow. In the early hours of the morning, she excused herself to privacy and left my company with my good graces. When I had realized that she had been gone too long, I panicked and began a frantic search. Gilda found her for me, and just in time, I might add. She was in Arthur's bedchambers and on the final incantation in creation of the largest fire-breathing man-eater of the times.

"What did you do?" Now sitting up straight, and on the very edge of her seat, eyes wide with excitement, Winnie asked.

"I did the only thing I could do, I interrupted her workings and challenged her skills to revocation. The interruption would only suspend the incantation until we were tried and through, then, should she be the victor, she could continue to life, should she fail, it would, and did, consume her to the oblivion of both creation and creator. The challenge was harsh, but at the time, I had little time to consider.

"What do you mean, "continue to life?" Winnie asked.

"Should I have failed in my attempt to stop her, the creation would have been finished and come to full life. That would also have meant that she'd destroyed me in her defense, it was the only way she could have been victorious, and the only alternative open to her."

"So, the dragon ate her?" She asked.

"No. The only way to explain it would be to say that the energy left in the unfinished spell could only be suspended for a short period of time, when it was left unattended for too long, it had to return to it's origin and do so all at once. Being created in steps and spells, it has only small amounts of energy added in small increments and they add together in multiples, it takes a lot of energy to create a life force of any kind, not to mention a large mass of life the size of a dragon. While she was busy with my challenge, this mass of energy was multiplying within itself, being an unfinished form, it had to be guided and formulated to shape, it was not. When energy of that type and amount is unleashed it has much more power than a sun going nova, all of this energy was directed in only one small form, that of it's origin,.. Moranda." He explained to the best of his abilities and in the words that he knew she could understand.

"You mean it blew her up?" She asked gesturing with her hands and arms extending outward.

"No, not exactly. It consumed her. That part is hard to explain, and I hope someday you will have the opportunity to learn it more exactly, but for now let this suffice. It became much like electricity and when it reached a certain amount of power, it discharged itself to itself, in that she created it, she was it until she could separate it from herself. When she failed to separate, it returned to her and her life force was much too

small to contain and insulate so much and she virtually grounded out, dissipated. It was completely painless, instantaneous, she had no idea what happened.” He answered.

“Well, how come it didn’t get you?” She asked.

“As I told you, it was like electricity, she was the conductor, it’s generator so to speak, and it only had continuity with her until it was completed, so it had no other course to run, but back to her. I had no prior contact with it so it couldn’t affect me nor any other physical object in existence.” He tried to make it as simple as possible and yet not too simple, there were reasons for her understanding all of the causes and effects involved.

“Well, how come Arthur never woke up while all of this was going on? Wasn’t it noisy?” She finally asked the only question he’d been expecting all along.

“Yes.” He began. “It was very noisy. The spell she’d cast was very involved and included incantations of a mixed nature, screams as well as whispers, almost all emotions were involved. But before she’d began, she’d cast a quick and easy sleep spell on him that would keep him sleeping even through being devoured by the dragon. After all was said and done, I removed the spell, which was really quite easy, and he awoke. I did have to explain all the smoke and the terrible odor that was lingering in his bedchambers.” He finished with a smile.

“All of this is very interesting, and I don’t wish to do anything to slow or stop these great stories, but you still haven’t answered my original question. How could you be Merlin, Magician in service to King Arthur and live so long as to be here and now? Nobody could live so long and not look older than you do. How come you don’t look so old?” She asked, pinning him down to the answer that he’d been trying all along to get to.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to get to.” He began to explain again. “I had been in Arthur’s service for many years. Over those years, I had not only become faithful to him, but my attachment to him and his goodness had become so obsessive that I’d began work on a spell to keep him alive eternally. I believed that if he were to live forever, all mankind would benefit because his goals were to help better everyone he could, his kindness was infectious, and all who shared his company were better off than before. Unfortunately, the spell was ill timed and slightly misdirected. I was not supposed to be a part of the final completion. I have not yet figured out just what went wrong, nor how to undo what I have done, but until I do, we are as timeless as the day we began on this adventure. I cannot grow another day older, but I can still die, and if I do die, there will be severe consequences of a magnitude that no man ever could, nor ever would comprehend. Because I am not of this time, I do not belong here, not permanently. If I ever do complete my computations and my spell reversal, we will return to our own time to end our lives in the way we were meant to and all will be right with time and life, which passes through it. Until then,.. I must continue to find the correctness of it all and avoid death by any means.” He said with his head slightly cocked to one side and one raised eyebrow as if searching in her eyes for understanding and belief.

With a half sympathetic expression and the tone that is carried only by a twelve-year-old girl filled with compassion and bewilderment she asked. “You said ‘we’, who is ‘we’, is Gilda and Stinker part of this too?”

“Yes, Gilda is.” He answered. “But Stinker is not. Stinker became a part of our family a few years ago when some careless hikers left an unattended campfire in a very dry year. They were not camped too far from the ridge where you like to walk. The

whole valley would have burned, and may be more if not for Gilda alerting me to the smoke when she did.”

“Did you put out the fire?” She asked.

“ You might say I did. There was a storm on the way and I just hurried it along some. It was not of sufficient size either, so I gave it a little poop too. By the time it was through, we nearly had a wash out. Messing with nature is always tricky, she has a mind of her own.” He said with a slight chuckle.

On that note Gilda felt need to take leave for a short while, she had lived this and didn't feel much like hearing about it. She spread her long black wings and in the same move, turned and leapt into flight toward the window all the while uttering a polite “ Excuse me”.

Her departure came at a most opportune time, for now he must explain the most intricate secret of all to Winnie.

“ Be very still and do not interrupt me for a bit, this is very important that you not share with Gilda and I cannot tell you of it in her presence.” He warned as he moved his chair closer to hers to enable him to talk in quieter tones lest Gilda should be listening outside. “ In his time Arthur had fallen in love with a beautiful lady, unfortunately this lady of his heart had once promised her hand to another. Her betrothed was a budding young magician who enjoyed special works with the creatures of the forest. He was true to the art and took it very seriously, studying and applying himself avidly. He spent so much time with his work that he made little time for her. Love is very fickle and it has many requirements, only one of which is a great deal of attention. She was true to their love, and tried desperately to keep it alive, but in his absence, she met another. Their meeting was quite innocent and they tried to avoid what was to come. Eventually they fell heart-locked in love and was unable to control their feelings for each other. Neither had had the opportunity to tell the young magician, Mandrake, before he would catch them kissing by the river's edge . Love also brews a nasty cup of emotion called jealousy. This cup is filled just as deep as the cup of love, but it is filled top to bottom with soured love, spoiled rotten to the bitter end. When this cup is spilled, it bodes no good where it runs. This cup ran allover the magician on that day and he cast a spell, a spell that I have yet to set right. In his anger, he mixed his words and amplified his emotions in such a manner that the incantation cast three together as one and no memory of the occurrence. Gwendolyn was the ladylove, the spell cast lady Gwendolyn and Arthur together into the body of the crow you know now as Gilda. He'd only meant to show Arthur how flighty love could be and wanted him to experience the life of a crow. He usually undid what changes he made because he respected nature so much, but this time he had made a mistake that he could not reconcile. He tried for years, it was his life's endeavors to undo what he'd done, he tried to the day of his death to make right the terrible error. To this day, I have kept it a secret from Gilda, now you know why a girl crow has the deep voice of a man. It is not just the voice of a man, but that of the greatest king ever. I cannot separate them, nor can I convert them. Gilda thinks that all of my works are spent on getting us back to our own time, but a good deal is spent on separating the love-birds to become one again.”

Now her face was lit with wonder and joy. Winnie's heart filled with the romance of the two and began a new beat in her chest, a beat that marked time for the arrival of another woman and a “King” in her world. She wanted him to separate them right then

and there. She knew he would if he could, but anticipation just became more than a big word for her.

“What can I do to help?” She asked with eyes wide . “ Is that why you want me to learn about some of the things in your work room?”

“ Yes, that is only a part of what I had in store for you.” He answered. I would like, if you would like to, for you to become my apprentice.”

He barely finished and hadn't time enough to start his next sentence when she jumped from her chair and onto his lap, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him several times in what was the first outbreak of affection between them. She had to excuse herself to the “little room” because she was truly afraid that she might not be able to control herself.

When she'd returned he swore her to secrecy and confided in her that if the two, Gilda, and Arthur were ever to find out it could cause much damage to both, where as they knew not of it now they were both living healthy and contented as one.

He was explaining to her the many duties and responsibilities of an apprentice, when Gilda returned and perched on the tall perch at the table. “ I see much water has run under the bridge in my absence.” She remarked lifting one leg and shifting her weight to rest on the other.

“Yes, Gilda, oh yes!” Winnie exclaimed excited almost to fits. “ I'm going to be an apprentice and learn to do magic and make many wonderful things happen!”

“ Lord save the world, another one tampering with the balance of what cannot even seem to keep itself balanced.” Gilda remarked in her sarcastic voice.

“There is much to learn, the path will not be an easy one.” Merlin advised. “You will not be learning magic as you know it to be, for a very long time and your patience will be tried to the very end, but you must understand that it all has a purpose. I do nothing without meaning. All things have good reason, that you must always remember.”

“Will you teach me to do tricks?” She asked.

“What I do is not trickery, what I do is far more than that, but I can and will teach you the difference between the two. In answer to your request, yes, I can teach you to do ‘tricks’ and I do plan to as a part of your learning. All of what you will do as my apprentice will not be fun, nor will it all be of great interest, but all of it is equally important. You will learn a great many things most people will never know, some things most people refuse to believe, and more things that people know and refuse to put to use despite their knowledge and abilities. But one of the most important things you must learn will be the responsibilities of only doing what you know to be right over what you would like to do.” He began her new education with raised eyebrows and a constant eye contact watching to note her level of acceptance.

“ Can we start now?” She asked anxiously.

“ Yes, I think the longer we delay, the harder we must work to catch up, and we already have much to catch up on.” He answered, rising up from his chair and turning toward the hall to the ‘mixing room’ as Gilda enjoyed referring to it. “Come along, let's get this ball rolling.” He instructed with his hand outstretched to her with palm up.

She nearly leaped from her chair, quickly inserted her hand in his, and tugged at his long arm as she pulled him toward the mysterious room down the long hall.

They toyed and turned things upside down all of that day as he acquainted her with some of the odd artifacts and items in the room. Some he would explain and show her in great depth, others not so much, and yet others, not at all. When she would ask of some, which he would avoid, he would simply explain, "All in good time, and that is not for 'this time', you have much to do just remembering what I have for you now, and remember you must." By the end of the day she was repeating it with him, word for word, almost frustrated. He had wanted to do so much more, but this was her birthday, she couldn't be expected to start her chores on her happy day. That night before she went into her room for bed, she made a special point to go to him, wrap her arms around his neck, and hug him with the heartfelt affection that could only be surpassed by the kiss she then rendered and the shine in her eyes as she looked into his and said "Thank you for the happiest birthday anyone could ever have, thank you!"

When she slept that night, she dreamed, for the first time in a long time she had a vivid and clear dream. In her dream, she was older and she was in the mixing room. She was mumbling things she could not understand and there was excitement and fear in the air. Her adrenaline was coursing through her like a tumultuous river and she held both fear and anticipation in one hand while in the other, she knew, was reason and responsibility. She wanted desperately to mix them, while all the while she knew to do so would be chaos and ruin. There was a wind blowing her long light-green gown tight against the front of her and trailed the tails out behind her like moss clinging to rocks in flowing waters. The wind was sweet and bitter, both at once, it was neither cold nor warm, but it caressed her like the fingers of an artist would mold a clay statue. Her eyes were wide and stared into the palms of her outstretched hands where, floating above her cupped palms was a hazy mist the size of a large grapefruit. It was rolling in all different directions and yet, stayed in the one place above her hands. It seemed to be transparent, and at the same time clouded. It was like a large crystal ball, without the crystal and was filled with blue and white, like clouds swimming in a circular sky of deep blue. She could see tiny objects inside it, floating in the middle, beneath the clouds and unmoving. The objects were the focus of her stare and were facing her as if beckoning her. When she awoke, she was still filled with exhilaration and excitement. The dream stayed on her mind and had enough electricity to it that she was compelled to share it with Merlin over breakfast. As she talked, she noticed a look of deep concern fill his face, and when she had finished telling him of it, she asked. "Is there something wrong? Did I say something bad?"

"No." He responded. "You did nothing wrong, nor bad, and it is good that you told me of this dream. It is a warning, a warning that we must guard against and that you must pay heed to. Your dream warns that I must take the utmost care in teaching you, and that you must pay special attention to learning the meanings and results of all that you do with what you do learn."

Still feeling guilty for bringing about a look of doubt and fear on the face of the man she had come to love as a father Winnie prodded on, "Was it a bad dream?"

"No, Winnie." He answered. "I don't believe that any dream is a bad dream. All dreams are good, even the ones that scare us. If a dream scares you, it is warning you, if a dream makes you feel good it is telling you that things are fine. Even the dreams that bother us help us. Your dream is one of your future, and heralds a new way

of life and of looking at the world for you. What you do with your future is up to you.” These thoughts he said aloud, but to himself he thought, “How you do it is up to me.”

“Should I tell you of all of my dreams?” she asked.

“I don’t think we have time to hear them all now, maybe one or two more, then we have things to do.” He answered.

“No.” She giggled in response. “Not all my old dreams, my new ones. The ones I have from now on.”

“Oh!” He blurted. “No, you don’t have to tell me of any, just the ones that you wish to share or have troubles with and would like help with.”

“I think I wanna take a long bath this morning and use the bubble bath that I got for my birthday, O.K.?” She asked changing the subject.

“Not too long, I hope, I have a lot of things for you to do that you could not on your birthday.” He answered rising and turning toward the hall to the mixing room.

Gilda flew behind Merlin to the mixing room. When they had arrived, she perched on top of what had long ago been her cage. Her head cocked to one side she looked at him and asked, “We both know full well what that dream was about, don’t we?”

He deliberately took extra time to answer, and just as she’d opened her beak to speak, he answered. “Yes, we do!” He turned toward her now and faced her fully. “Just because we know something does not mean we must inflict it upon her. Give me a chance, I’ve been working on just that problem and I do not need you nor any other to interfere with my efforts, let me and time have our chance.” He sounded almost scolding.

“I’ll do as you ask, but I must ask of you, please make certain your works, works this time. We haven’t time nor place for even the slightest failure.” She responded reverently.

“Time is one thing that can finally be an ally in this case, she has got to grow up, that takes time, in that time I will do all that I can to teach her as well as to prepare.” Merlin said.

“Have you really been that busy that you haven’t noticed?” Gilda asked, almost mockingly.

“Noticed what?” Merlin queried.

“The bumps.” Gilda said.

“Bumps? Have you lost your mind? What bumps are you referring to you flying shadow?” Merlin asked irritated slightly.

“The girl has got bumps already, haven’t you noticed anything, are you going daft and blind?” Asked Gilda, raising her voice slightly.

“Lord love a lizard!” Merlin exclaimed! “No, I hadn’t noticed, but now that you bring it up, there is a difference in her fit these days.”

“Well, aren’t you going to have a talk with her? She is going to have special needs and such, are you ready for that?” She asked, now rocking back and forth from one foot to the other as if the perch had suddenly become too hot to stand on.

“No, not me, that’s your place, you know well that birds have far better diplomacy in that area than do magicians.” He evaded.

“Oh no you don’t, I warned you against taking her in in the first place, she’s your pet, you clean up after her.” Gilda defended.

“Gilda,” he approached with head lowered slightly and softer tones. “She needs a ‘girl’ friend at a time like this, and you have far more qualifications there than do I, I ask you now, Please, as a kindness to us both, please take this into your most capable care and do what is right for all of us, would you, Please?”

“As you know well I will, but you must help wherever you can. My memory in these matters is not what you may think it to be, and times are not the same as when it was.” She yielded.

“Now would probably be a good time to approach her, she is in the tub soaking in bubbles, I told her not to be too long, so you must hurry.” Merlin advised.

“I would have appreciated a little more time to prepare, I don’t know yet just how to begin, nor just what to say.” Said Gilda taking flight through the tall arch window.

He knew that he didn’t have much time to work alone until Gilda and Winnie would enter, so he scurried and scampered about, fixing, mixing preparing and had just finished the incantation to the beginning portions when the door opened and they entered the room. Winnie looking like she’d been caught with her hand in the cookie jar and Gilda quiet and secluded.

“Winnie, I want you to clean off the benches and tables, be careful not to mix any spilled powders and liquids. You must clean each mess as an individual, should you fail, you could mix the wrong mixtures and create a monstrosity that could take considerable work to be rid of. While working on the tattle table be special certain not to turn any of the wheels.” He instructed touching the table that she had sat at to find her birthday. “Turning the wheels could not only cause misleading information, but could cause me grievous calculations, resulting in mystical messing of magnanimous proportions.” He handed her a cloth and a small pail, and then he turned back to the bench where he had been working. Moving this here, and that there, he repositioned flasks, bottles, bags and boxes all the while uttering and mumbling in low rhythmic tones and rocking in an almost dance-like fashion. A small hint of sulfuric odor and a tiny flash of light, slight pop and a fizzle like that of a sparkler burning and a small round crystal appeared on the table before him replacing the bag and box.

At the sound of the pop Winnie jumped slightly and turned to see what was going on, as she turned the rag she was using accidentally dragged through the gray powder she had been cleaning and into the blue smudge of ‘sticky stuff’ on the edge of the table. Unnoticed, they began to bubble and steam arose in a slight curl. Now the ‘sticky stuff’ turned a dark black color and began to spread, the edges of it glowing a light red and seemingly to seek out the rag now hanging limp in Winnie’s right hand.

Merlin, at that instant, had picked up the small crystal in his left hand and begun to turn around to speak to her. His eyes grew wide and he raised his right hand with the first two fingers half-curved, thumb extended forward, and the other two fingers fully extended, at the instant his elbow achieved full lock in her direction he commanded with a near growl, “still as you are!” At that instant, the concoction seemed to freeze in place. Winnie stood staring at Merlin, afraid that she had done something to draw punishment that had yet to take effect and did not know the effects of the purple-white flash she had witnessed emitted from his hand gesture. As he lowered his hand, he instructed her to turn around and see what she had created. She turned slowly and took a step back away, afraid that she may still be in some form of danger. Her eyes opened wide as they landed on what had looked to her like a cooking accident with a glowing red rim. It was more

off the table than it was on and it was only a fraction of an inch from where the rag in her hand had been. Her throat grew suddenly dry and her face felt hot, tears approached and she chocked them back as she asked in fear. “Did I do that?”

“I’m afraid you did.” Gilda offered.

“This is exactly what I had warned you about.” Merlin said in a soft and steady voice. “You really must be more careful and pay much more attention to your actions in this room. This one is not vile, nor is it of consequence, it can be dealt with by simply adding the remainder of that beaker of liquid over its entirety.” He said as he pointed to the only beaker of liquid on the table. “As it was you who created it, then it is just that you must also undo it.” He instructed with a slight nod and a gesturing finger in the direction of the creation.

Winnie picked up the beaker and held it over the black glob. As she began to pour it bubbled and a white smelly smoke arose from it. As each bubble popped, that part of it disappeared into the smoke and rose upward. The red outer ring turned a transparent blue and seemed to undulate slightly, and then it turned clear white and disappeared. Then, nothing but the odor remained, and it was a horrible odor, one that she would not soon forget. She fanned her hand in front of her face in hopes of ridding the smell, much to no avail, as she turned and apologized to Merlin. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do it, this don’t mean I don’t get to help you any more, does it?”

“No, it only means that you have learned your first important lesson in creating living mistakes. Not everything we create is done intentionally and we are responsible for and to all of our creations. When you create something, know how you did it in that you may also undo it. You have created a life, and when you did, a life elsewhere in existence was undone that it could be done here. When you sent it back, a new life began in its place near where you took it from originally.” Merlin knew this explanation would require more, and it did.

“You mean someone died when I did that?” She asked.

“No, not necessarily ‘someone’, but rather something.” He began. “The life you created was a ‘thing’, so that is what passed on. When you dissolved it, another began a new life. The new one does not necessarily have to be the same as the old, but it would be what was needed at that time, and in that place to balance out the natural life of that time and place. It is all very intricate and delicate, and if it is left unbalanced it could be chaotic.”

“What does that mean? Chaotic?” She asked innocently.

“To put it as simply as I can for now, it would be very bad and everything would be mixed up and confusing.” He explained. “I have a few things I must attend to now for the next few minutes. Go about cleaning up and be careful.” He warned as he walked to a small fireplace, a circular pillar of stones about three feet tall and two feet in diameter.

There, suspended by three chains hanging by one from the ceiling, was a thick black pot with a simmering clear liquid inside it. He took the ladle from where it hung on the side and dipped it slowly into the pot. He stirred the liquid slowly as if to be careful not to bruise it, then he drew the ladle out and poured it out until there was only less than a quarter ladle left. Carefully wiping the bottom of the ladle on the edge of the pot so as not to drip a careless drop, he carried it to a small box of sand on the shelf over the tattle table. There was a long thin line drawn in the sand and a small odd shaped indentation at the middle of the line. He placed the crystal in the indentation and slowly poured the

contents of the ladle into the long thin line. The liquid acted as a jelly and neither did it run the line, nor did it seep into the sand, but it did as he'd expected it to, it glowed a bright silvery glow. Carefully he sat the ladle in a dish on the shelf and held both hands over the glowing liquid with their palms down. Slowly he lowered both thumbs to point straight down, and raised both little fingers as high as he could. With both forefingers touching and both thumbs touching, he closed his eyes and uttered a few words in Latin, then a few in French, some in Spanish, some in a long dead language that led to the Gaelic of his time, and finished with "Of earth and time, from the depths untouched, from liquid to solid, now needed much, sands of shores and liquids of seas, bearer be wary, be careful, be wise." Slowly then he turned both palms inward and upward, all fingers and thumbs ending in a claw-like shape and shaking with the intensity he instilled. When he opened his eyes the liquid had solidified and become a shiny silver chain, and it had formed a perfect circle from which suspended a foot with long claws completely encompassing the small crystal. The crystal was clear and had a soft pink hue inside at the center. He picked up the bobble and went over to Winnie. He stood behind her and placed one hand on her right shoulder. She looked up at him without turning around and smiled. He held the pendant out in front of her and asked if she would wear it for him.

"Oh yes, could I please?" She asked with excitement, and raised her hair from her neck.

He lowered the amulet over her head and down in front of her, as he drew it up so as to close the ends together he uttered, "To this body I commit thee and in service I command, obedience and service obliged. Bear tolerance and aid in wit, for life and through love, only to she and only ended by me." With the last word of the chant the ends of the chain grew together and became one. The chain was now solid and unremoveable by any other than he. He instructed her "Do not attempt to remove this as long as you live, and allow no other to witness its works nor it's abilities. Do not allow any one else to hold it in their hand for more than a mere glance without first repeating 'my permission is granted but for only a peek.' And in those words only, lest they should lose their hand."

"Lose their hand?" She asked almost startled. "How could they do that?"

"This amulet has a grip on you and your life, if it senses another grip it will defend its position with all of the abilities instilled in it, the first to suffer will be the closest and most imminent, should a threat to you last beyond that, it will extend itself to proportionate needs." He explained.

"What is this for?" She asked picking it up and gazing inside at the hue that had now changed to a green color matching the green in her eyes.

"It will take a day or two, but as it adjusts to you, it will help you to understand things about you that I cannot explain and you yourself do not yet know. It will protect you in times of most need and it will guide you in your darkest hours. I have taken from memory long implanted in the earth and drawn from the waters of wisdom, it holds metals from the earth for strength, fire from magic for courage, and the breath of time for endurance. This amulet is like no other before you, and there will be no other again, hold it near and dear to you and rely on it as you would the mother you have never known and the only father I hope you ever will. It is magic, as am I, because it comes from me. Its

powers will grow with you, but be careful not to rely too heavily on the abilities herein lest you could hinder your own.” He cautioned.

“How does it work?” She asked. “I mean, is it like a cross or something like that? Do I have to pray or something?”

“Not exactly, pray.” He explained. “After it adjusts to you, you hold it in your hand and think hard of something, like a question you have, and the answer will come to you as your own thought.”

“Any question at all? You mean I could know anything?” Almost unbelieving.

“No, it will not unlock the secrets of the universe to you, but it will, as you and it grow, sense your comprehension level and give you the answers that the limits of your mind will accept and understand.” He said.

The gratitude she felt at that moment paled to the countless questions that began to fill her head. She had so many that she dared not ask before and so many she did not even know how to ask but wished so much to be able to. This came to her at a very good time, and may be that this amulet would help her to know how to ask, when, and just what to ask, might even know the answers so she would not have to ask at all. Her head was swimming with thoughts and questions, so full that she thought it just may burst, or she would not have room for all of the answers. She became so preoccupied, and it was so apparent, Merlin told her to stop work, for now. He advised her to go for a walk and clear her mind; she had done enough for now anyway. “Lord knows what malady could be accidentally created in this mindless state of confusion should you stay in a room full of such lethal potential” He jested while gesturing a sweeping motion toward the door with his raised hand.

Winnie walked for hours though, it only seemed a few minutes had passed when she sat down on a large rock overlooking a long valley. The entire valley was nearly completely covered with tall evergreen trees. There were small patches of quaking aspens scattered here and there, but the only other exception was the river that ran through the bottom as it twisted and wound its way through the dense foliage all the way to the valley mouth which opened wide and so far away it was only barely visible. The leaves were already turning and a lot of them had fallen to the forest floor. Today was warmer than the three prior and the sun on her face felt good. With her hand tightly wrapped around the new amulet and her mind in a myriad of new questions and newly hatching answers, she had not realized she had been staring until a movement on the valley floor caught her eyes. It was a shiny movement, the reflection of the sun off something moving near the river. Now her curiosity grew stronger than her fears as she lowered herself down from the rock and began carefully guiding her footsteps to intercept this intruder in her world. She crept along being ever so careful not to make a sound, nor to be seen. As she grew closer and closer the sound of the river grew louder and her adrenalin rushed faster and faster. Finally she caught a full view of the intruder, it was a boy. A young man, about fourteen or so. He was fishing with a long pole and was wet up to the middle of his thighs. He was wearing Levis, a heavy, long sleeved, red and white-checked shirt. His Levis was pulled down over high-top cowboy boots that looked like they had seen their better days. His hair was reasonably short, but not so neat, not what she could see from what of it was stringing out from under what remained of a well-worn and hook-adorned gray-white cowboy hat. She watched him as he worked the end of his line above a small calm pool behind several large protruding rocks.

When he was satisfied with its placement, he allowed it to float down into the pool. Then, suddenly the waters around it erupted in a fury and began to boil. From the tumultuous waters at the end of his line came a large angry looking fish with wide eyes and long red-orange strips under its lower jaws. It leapt clear out of the water, twisting and heaving, seemingly to attempt to pull the young man into the river by the line in its mouth. She watched wide-eyed and nearly vexed as the two performed their competitive ballet. The fish heaving and diving, the boy reeling and pulling the rod up and down in rhythm with the leaps and dives. First, the fish was nearing the shore, then a loud buzzing sound and he would take the line out and away from the boy's anxious grasp. This watery excitement went on for much longer than she thought it should. Then, just as the boy held the rod tip high and reached down into the waters in attempt to grab the monstrosity, the fish gave one last large lurch, a cowboy boot slipped on a moss-covered rock and the boy staggered, danced, and bobbed out into the river in attempt to recover his balance. Despite all of his endeavors, the ballet ended with the boy face down in the river and the fish unseen ever more. Try as she may, containment was not a virtue allowed, she burst out with uproarious laughter at his plight.

At first, he did not hear her laughter, he was so frustrated and embarrassed at his own awkwardness that he barely noticed that the fish had gotten away clean. He scrambled over the rocky bottom like a bear chasing a slippery fish until he finally gained enough grip to come to a full kneel, that is when he noticed the girlish fits of high-pitched laughter above the rush of the river and ringing throughout the forest. He knelt in the river motionless for what must have truly been only two minutes, but was later in the stories told 'a half an hour' just watching this bewitching young girl roar with a belly laughter unbeknownst to the two of them before, and ever since. He thought she would never quit, and did not know whether to get up and chastise her, frolic around and entice more of the same, or just stay in place and see just how long she could sustain this jovial roar. As he pondered his dilemma, he noticed that she had bewitchingly green eyes on which the reflection of the light from the sun danced like sparklers on the fourth of July. He admired her deep dimples that accented her laughter like spice does a fine dish, and how her hair flowed like a mountain stream down over her shoulders. Her face was filled with a fresh unfamiliarity that radiated with an innocent friendliness. Although he did not think it outright to himself just then, she was the most beautiful human being that had ever graced his vision. When he finally realized that he was still kneeling in the river, he flushed with embarrassment, gathered himself and his broken rod up, and waded like a spoiled child to the shore near her. He did not say a word, not at first. He looked with disdain at his broken pole, fidgeted with the binding threads over the eyelets, checked the reel, and threw it all down at his feet. He looked at her almost as if he knew her. She had stopped laughing now, but the smile had not faded and her dimples graced her smile as the stars grace the night sky. Keeping a close watch on language that would not be so kind around 'the boys' he could not help but to smile when he asked, "I guess that would look kinda funny from where you set, huh?"

Winnie stood up and lost most of her smile at the sound of his nearly full changed voice. Fidgeting with a twig she had picked up, she turned partially away, not moving her feet, she responded. "I have never seen anyone dance with a fish before."

"Well, I wasn't exactly dancin', I was tryin' t' catch that Mountain Moby." He defended.

“Oh!” She exclaimed, mockingly. “I did not know which of you were doing just what to whom?”

“I come all this way up here this time of th’ year ‘cause th’ fishin is better and ya don’t get no tourists this far up. What brings a beauty like you up s’ far frum town?” He asked.

“I live up here.” She answered.

“No ya don’t!” He argued. “Don’t nobody live up here. I been comin’ up here since I was a pup and didn’t nobody ever live up here. Is yer daddy fishin’ up here? Where is he?”

Her voice grew defensive in a child-like way as she responded, “My ‘Daddy’ is not of your concern and I’ll have you know, I do live in these woods, I take care of the woods and the creatures herein!”

“Look!” He defended himself. “First off, I don’t mean no offense, but no girl is gonna live up here in th’ winter. Next, I been huntin’ and fishin’ up here muh ‘hole life and there aint no cabins ner houses up no farther than the Finch place ‘bout two miles up frum the mouth of the canyon. Now if ya wanna keep up that story, that’s fine, but I aint b’levin that no girl lives up here and takes care of the woods and the creatures in it!”

In the girlish fit that was her first since coming to the mountain lair, she lost sight of the fact that he was the first person even near her age that she had seen since ‘The Home’. Without realizing how much she was enjoying the argument, not to mention how it had taken her mind off pressing problems, she struck back. “Oh yea? GILDA!” she yelled at the top of her lungs, and as she did the large black crow swooped down from where she had been watching in the tree tops behind the boy, picked up the bag containing two fish that hadn’t got away, and flew to a nearby deadfall tree. There she sat mockingly on top of the bag. “Just what do you say to that?” Winnie spurned.

“O.k., Ya got a pet crow, so what? I got a dog at home does that good. That don’t make you no guard of th’ forest er nuthin.” He smirked, hands on his hips and bent slightly at the waist.

“There are others I could call, I do not wish to abuse my given powers.” She asserted, now clutching the amulet. Without her notice, the amulet began to grow warm in her hand and her sense of hostility grew less. She began to see the futility I this feud and wanted to end it with a softer tone.

Before she could begin again he challenged as most boys would. “Oh yea? Lets see ya bring in a bear then, got one of them hangin’ round?”

“No, I am sorry, I do not.” Now more in control of her thoughts and emotions, she wished to end the feud and begin a possible friendship. “Please, forgive me. I have not acted so childish in a good long time and I am ashamed of myself. My behavior was beneath me and not respectful of you.” She released the amulet and extended her hand in friendship. The amulet now was full with the green glow matching her eyes and catching his attention.

Shifting his eyes from the amulet to hers, then back to the amulet, he took her hand with a bewildered look on his own face. Her hand felt soft, warm, and very feminine in his, and he liked it.

“How come you talk s’ funny?” He asked, still shaking her hand.

She released her slight grip and their hands fell apart. “The man who raised me, ‘Poppy’ taught me all I know, and is still teaching me. He insists I speak properly. ‘

Your speech is the first window to your true inner self.' He says, 'Lest you should be thought a fool, open the window with wisdom.' He always speaks as he would have me speak, in that I will learn it more easily." She explained with a warm half-smile.

"Really?" He beckoned. "Tell me where ya live, and Ill walk ya home."

"Oh no!" She reacted with near fear. "I can not do that, and you must not follow me. My home is very secret and must remain so always."

This was exactly what Winnie was not to do. She had only now realized her mistake in even meeting with this young lad. Her inner thoughts were racing. Her most prominent fear was now that she had met him, his natural curiosity would not allow him to be out-witted by her. She thought fast and did formulate a very good plan.

"By the way, you did not tell me your name. My name is Wendy, my friends call me Winnie." Again, she extended her hand, only this time with fingers more limp and palm down.

"My name is Calvin, muh friends call me Cal. Hi Wendy." He said, again shaking her hand and drawing a slight loss in her smile. He knew she wanted him to be more gentle, not necessarily kiss it, but not shake it, but he felt embarrassingly stupid kissing a girl's hand. Before she could signal it, he released her hand and smiled sheepishly.

Before he could speak again she had to offer to meet him again, this may keep him back as she made her escape into the woods. "Will you be up this far again soon?"

"Yea, I was gonna come up again next weekend after school." He answered.

"Does that mean that you do not intend to now?" She asked, almost fearing the answer.

"No, no it don't. Are you gonna be here 'bouts again then?" he queried.

"I can meet you right here if the weather is permitting, and provided you honor my request and do not attempt to follow me home today." A near challenge, and an answer, all in one very neat feminine package.

"And if I do follow ya, Then what?" He asked.

"I ask you, on your honor, as a gentleman, please do not follow me. Should you fail to honor my request, you could suffer severe consequences, and I will not be compelled to honor my commitment to meet you here at noon, one week from today." She warned.

"Alright, you win. I won't follow ya t'day, but I aint makin' no promises 'bout next week. Not 'till next week. Does that work fer you?" He agreed, and asked.

"We can not say today, what we will say next week, I will agree to those terms. So Cal, if you will excuse me, I will go now, and I will see you in one week." She smiled and walked backwards into the woods, waving all the while.

"I can't wait fer next week, Bye Wendy!" He said, waving as she entered the woods.

Wendy intentionally went two miles out of her way to hide her trail, and a good thing too! When she stopped on a high ridge where she had planned to turn and head to the Lair Gilda flew in the aerial report that 'That Hillbilly Kid' was still following and only a short distance back. She advised that she had taken matters into her own control and bid Winnie to go off trail only a quarter mile farther, then head directly for the Lair, and make haste.

Calvin was doing his level best to be coy and thought he had been unnoticed. He had just seen Winnie go through a tight crevice and up into a close area between two cliffs. Now out of sight, he could move more freely and he broke out into a near run, trying to catch up just a bit closer. Just as he entered the crevice and noticed that it was very nearly too tight for him, his nose filled with an unmistakable odor, right in the middle of the tight path stood a three legged skunk, tail raised and it's aim was deadly. Almost unable to breathe, Calvin was forced to retreat. Gagging, chocking and gasping for air, now the only thing on his mind was the river and a long rinsing soak.

When Winnie arrived at the Lair, Merlin was already seated at the table and had set her place. Gilda, perched on the perch at the table, looked at her, back to Merlin, then back at Winnie as she hung her sweater on the hook made from a dragon's claw by the door. She went immediately in and washed her hands. When she emerged from the washroom, she greeted him with a new tone in her voice, a light hearted and cheerful smile.

"Hello, Poppy! How was your day?" She asked.

"Hello. My day was quite obviously not equivalent to yours. Nonetheless, it was a good day. What has perked your day to such obvious joy, may I ask?" He prodded, knowing full well the answer, and yet expecting an evasion.

"I met a boy, down by the river. He was funny, and kind of cute." She answered before even she was ready.

"A boy, you say?" He asked. "Who is this 'cute' young lad, may I ask?"

"His name is Calvin, I do not know how old he is, nor do I know much more about him. I do know that I felt good talking to him, and that he made me laugh real hard when he fell into the river." She answered.

"What was he doing up this far from the city below?" Merlin was slightly concerned, but not worried. He trusted her to keep all of his secrets, and knew well that Gilda would help them both to do so.

"He comes up this way late in the year to avoid tourists, and to fish in the river. He said this is the better part of the season and the better part of the river for it."

"Did he give you any trouble?" He knew of the entanglement, and only briefly, of the escape. Gilda had to be brief in her report and had only told him that she had to give aid and guidance.

"He did try to follow me, but Gilda helped me to escape him. Had it not been for her watchful eye, I may have been too hasty in my return to notice that I had not lost him when I thought I had. Thank you Gilda." She acknowledged with a polite bow of her head in Gilda's direction.

"You are most welcome." Gilda responded. "But I did not do it alone. Much good thanks are due to Stinker."

"Stinker?" She asked with surprise. "I did not even know she was in the area. What did she do?"

"She set him in a hasty retreat in the crevice, below the cliffs where you turned hard for the Lair. She was well placed and I might add, well aimed when he entered. He was still rolling in the river when last I saw him." Gilda said tilting her head from one side to the other and chuckling slightly. To that they all laughed.

"Do you plan to see this boy again?" Asked Merlin.

“ We had made a bargain, but he failed his end.” She began. “ I told him that should he not attempt to follow me, I would meet with him at noon, one week from this day.”

“ Do you still intend to see him?” He knew the answer; he wanted to hear her say it.

“ I am not sure, just now. I feel that although he broke his word, and even though I made the concession in the event should he do so, I am still bound to my word. Is that not true?” She asked.

“ Honor depicts that, when one’s word is given, it is kept at all cost. When special concessions are made and agreed to by all involved, the obligations are as flexible as the concessions and expectations. I believe that you would not be bound given that he failed his end, but I am concerned that you would deal with one who would show dishonor so readily.” He exclaimed.

“ I am afraid that I was some what dishonorable first, in that I laid the trap which he sprung. I was devious enough as to attempt to leave him no alternative, all the while knowing that he would not keep his word. Does this not, then, place a burden of obligation on me to redeem his honor, or at least offer him the opportunity to do so himself?” She posed.

“It is obvious your young femininity is growing, you not only caught him, but you have endangered my wits as well. The amulet is guiding you well, and with that, I rest the obligatory duties and responses between you, your heart, your head, and your conscience. I do believe you will do the right thing.” His answer had been waiting for this particular point in the conversation and instilled pride and confidence in her young heart.

From that moment forth, Merlin knew unequivocally that the amulet and she were the match that he had conjured them to be. He could not be certain until the amulet took hold for the first time, now he was certain.

All through that week Winnie worked hard, trying to keep her young mind busy and off the impending date. She applied herself to her schooling, her cleaning, and to her newly assigned task, that of memorizing the names of all of the powders in the mixing room. The only thing she applied herself to more, was the amulet. She kept her activities with the amulet secret in her room each night, after the work with Merlin and Gilda was done. She did not use it outside her room, that was the only place where even Gilda would not interrupt her unannounced. Her room, was understood to be her private sanctuary, where she was allowed total privacy. She would never do anything that would breach the trust they shared, but there were things that a girl would share with no one. Some girls have invisible friends, some, their diaries, Winnie had her amulet. It did not speak to her, but it did answer her most private questions, and it would share fantasies and dreams with her. Her amulet would allow her mind to wander and amble down pathways that others would never see, much less ever understand. Through her amulet, she learned that she would soon be needing and sharing many wonderful feelings and friends, but it would not clarify all of the visions. She understood that to know all of the future is to change it, and to change it is to negate the knowledge of it, hence a glimpse is more than enough. She and the amulet grew closer in that week than in any period throughout their union. That was the initial and most important bonding period, and it went farther and better than it was intended to.

Finally the big day came. When Winnie awoke and rose from her bed early that morning she knew that she had things to tend to, but the day had been too long in coming not to be the success that she had hoped for. The robe she normally wore to breakfast was left hanging on the hook, she gathered the pants and shirt she had planned to wear, and still in her pajamas, made a mad dash for the shower. No bath, that would take time. She had things to do before she could be excused, and, as she had well learned, she would not even think of tending to personal whims until the obligatory duties were done. Out of the bath, dressed, and even to the surprise of Merlin, her breakfast disappeared almost faster than he could have conjured it to. It took very little time to clean the mixing room, she had spent extra time last night tending to that. Little did she know, Merlin and Gilda took special care to help wherever they could. The mixing room done, now she must clean her own room and excuse herself. Most of her room was kept clean, she only needed to make her bed, that took no time at all, her dirty clothes were in the hamper and the ones she had cleaned yesterday were already put where they belong. She checked herself in the tall mirror on the back of her door, smiled a smile of satisfaction, and rushed out to find Merlin and Gilda gathering the breakfast mess from the dining table.

“Oh my!” She exclaimed in surprise. “I forgot the dishes. Please, let me do that.” She said reaching for the dish in Merlin’s hand.

“Thank you, Winnie.” He replied, drawing the dish away from her grasp. “I tended to these for a good many years before you, and I do not believe that it will do me any harm to do them one more time. You appear to be in something of a hurry this morning, is something afoot?” He asked being coy.

“Why, yes. It has been a week now, and I have an appointment to keep.” She reminded him with her head half-bowed in girlish embarrassment.

“An appointment?” He raised one eyebrow, and his voice, slightly. “Gilda, do we have an appointment today?”

“No, I do not remember any pressing engagements.” Gilda played along. “There are no holidays, no meetings, no parties. No. No engagements that I know of.”

Her face flush with anticipation and embarrassment Winnie was near to dance like a child waiting at the bathroom door. “Calvin.” She said.

“What of Calvin?” Merlin toyed.

“I have an appointment at the river with Calvin, remember?” She now realized he was teasing and raised both hands to her mouth to cover her uncontrollable grin and continued. “There is that matter of honor that must be tended to, would you please excuse me that I might not be untimely and maintain my honor?”

“Oh! My, please do not let it ever be said that I, Merlin, ever would stand in the light of a lady’s honor. Please do go, and make haste that I might be redeemed for the delay.” He bid her off with a light heart and in jest that she would feel neither guilt, nor remorse in her harried departure.

She rushed to him, tiptoed and while pulling him to her, kissed him on the cheek.

“I will not be too late. Gilda, are you coming?” She asked over her shoulder as she donned her sweater from the hook by the door.

“You needn’t worry, I will always be where I am most needed, when I am most needed there.” Gilda asserted.

III

Nearly running down the mountain she was both nervous and curious. All sorts of thoughts raced through her head. What should she say first? Should she scold him for following her? What if something happened and he could not come? What if he forgot? What if he should attempt to follow her again? What would they find to talk about? She could easily find the answers to some of these questions, but she did not wish to rely too heavily on the amulet, “Some answers are best if you work them out with your own abilities, lest your mind should grow weak from lack of use.” She could almost hear Merlin saying it even as the river now came into sight. Her heart pounded with excitement as her eyes scanned the meeting area. Nothing yet. Maybe he has not yet arrived. Could she be early? Definitely not late. Still her mind circled in anticipation and hope. Nearer and nearer she drew, and yet not a sound not sign, could he be held up, a bear, mountain lion or other unforeseen adversity? She finally came to the agreed upon place and he was not in sight. She looked up stream, then down, peering through the trees and under the branches, yet no sign of him. She decided to sit down on a rock and wait for a little while, she did have some time, and he was not too late yet. The October air was cool, and there was a slight breeze, but the sun was still warm enough that it was not uncomfortable as she sat picking at the moss on the dead tree beside her. She heard the wind rush through wing feathers and looked up to witness Gilda landing on a branch high above her.

“Did you see him anywhere, Gilda?” She asked. Gilda did not answer.

“Gilda, do you hear me? Have you seen him?” She asked again. Still no answer. This made her heart race again. If Gilda would not answer, it would only mean one thing, someone is near and she would not reveal herself. Her eyes quickly searched the forest. “Oh, He’s a crafty one.” Winnie whispered to herself. “Well, two can play much better than one.” She smiled as she lowered herself to the ground and crept under the dead tree. Ever so slowly, she moved so not to make a sound she crawled beside three large rocks and looked up at Gilda. Watching her as she watched something moving through the trees. Now she had him, he stepped on a dry branch and the snap sounded to be to her left and not too far off. Carefully she maneuvered herself around behind him, she finally seen him. He was on his hands and knees, trying to sneak up on the rock where she had been sitting. Laughter welling up inside her, she contained it and kept her distance as she followed and watched him. Oops! Another dry twig, that one made him jump back and catch a dry needle in the palm of his hand. He sat up, pulled it out, sucked the blood from the hole, shook his hand and went on. Finally she could take no more, she decided to close the distance. As she did, he neared the rock. Simultaneously, almost as if they had planned it, both lurched toward their intended victims and growled aloud. This startled both of them, her hands curled and went to her face in shock, and he spun immediately around with clenched fists, eyes wide and mouth agape, in full defense mode. Their reactions brought about uncontrollable laughter to both. When the laughter had faded, they sat down on the rocks at the river’s edge and talked. She wanted to know all about what it was like in the valley, and school, and movies, and on and on. He attempted to answer all of her questions and managed to get in a few of his own. She managed to evade the questions about Merlin and the Lair, and she explained that the reason that she did not attend school was that Merlin tutored her at home. They lived too far for her to travel every day and that she would like to someday come to town, just to see if it was all he said it was. Finally, the day was fading, and the

shadows were growing longer. The air was growing cooler and the sky was beginning to fill with clouds. Winnie knew by the look of things that there was a storm brewing and had to make haste, not only for herself, but Cal had a long journey as well and she would not like it if he got hurt or lost because they stayed too long.

“Aw there aint no reason t’ hurry, I can make it t’ th’ Finch place b’fore dark, after that, it’s all down hill t’ town. Maybe I could walk ya part way home, Huh?” He offered in an awkward attempt to spend more time with her and find out where she lived.

“I am afraid there is good reason to go now, there is a nasty storm on the way, and neither do I wish to get caught in it, nor do I wish to have you caught in it.” She responded. “I told you before, you may not follow me home. You dishonored yourself on our last meeting, should you do so again, I will be forced to avoid seeing you again.”

“Now how ‘d I dishonor muhself?” He asked in a defensive tone.

“You followed me, you gave your word that you would not, yet you attempted to any way. That is not the act of an honorable person.” She explained.

“How’d you know?” He asked, more defiant than curious.

“I told you, I have friends in the woods, they take care of me and they tell me things others would not.” She answered.

“Well then, How come I didn’t follow ya all th’ way home? How’d ya know I don’t already know where ya live?” He challenged.

“If we really must do this, you were stopped in the crevice by a skunk and you went sprawling to the river to rid you of the effects. Now must we continue this way?” She asked.

“You saw that?” He asked in surprise.

“No, I did not see it, I wish I had. I was told of it that evening. I told you that my friends tell me things others will not know. Now, please believe me when I say that you must not follow me. When the time is right, **if** the time is right, then and only then will I allow you to come to my home. For now, you must try to redeem your honor and live up to the very letter of your word, this time, and any other that we might meet. I am forbidden to spend time in the company of the dishonorable sort. I come this time to see you, to allow you this chance at redemption. I was slightly wrong when I was not completely honest with you in our last meeting, for that, you earned this trial. Please, I ask you, do not fail me this time.” Winnie wanted to say more, but she felt she had already said too much.

“You sure do make it hard fer a fella t’ be yer friend. I aint never had nobody call me a liar in such a sweet way, but I guess yer right.” He confessed. “I just wanna get t’ know ya, and t’ spend some time with ya. I’m sorry if I let ya down, I didn’t mean t’ upset ya none. I want t’ see ya again and if that means that I can’t follow ya, I guess I can wait ‘till later t’ know where ya live.” He bowed his head and looked at her through the top of his raised eyebrows in an apologetic manner.

“You did not really let me down. I had some idea that you would attempt to follow me, that is why I went the wrong way. I can, and will forgive you, provided you do not dishonor neither yourself nor me again. I would like to get to know you more, also, may we meet here again some time?” She knew better than to ask, but she felt she may have put him in such a way as to make him afraid to do so.

“Halloween I got a lotta stuff t’ do and I can’t get away, can you come t’ town then?” He asked, thankful that she still wanted to see him.

“When is that?” She asked vaguely.

“You know, next week. When all the witches, ghosts and goblins come out.” He answered in jest. “You won’t be afraid t’ walk through th’ woods on Halloween, will ya?”

“I will have to see, I do not know what is in store for that day and I am falling behind on my studies. Should I not be able on that day, is there another when we might meet here?” Winnie asked, unsure.

“Well, maybe ‘round Thanksgivin’ I could sneak out fer a while.” He offered.

“If you must sneak, then it might not be a good time. Sneaking out is not honorable.” She asserted.

“It aint really sneakin’.” He tried to explain. “We always have a lot of family over then and I always go off by muhself ‘cause I don’t like th’ crowds n’ all that family stuff.”

“I should think, if your family has come to visit you, you should honor them by attending.” She argued.

“Naw, they ‘spect me t’ go off. They kinda wait for it.” He tried again.

“It is not for me to tend your family matters, but I would not feel right should you avoid them in order to attend to me.” She responded.

“Look, Wendy. If they knew I was off meetin’ with a pretty girl, why heck, they’d be proud I was gone. Heck, if you wasn’t s’ hard t’ get t’ know, ya might come t’ meet muh family some day.” Frustration forced him to extend an invitation that could embarrass him into his twenties.

“Are you asking me to come to your home and meet your family for Thanksgiving?” She asked with a hint of blush in her cheeks.

“If I was, would ya come?” He asked, half hoping she would say no.

“I must ask Poppy, before I make any commitments outside the Lai..... house.” She corrected and realized that she was getting too comfortable and lax.

“Well that’s a ways off enyhow, what ‘bout meetin me in town on Halloween at th’ Library. They always got a good spook alley out back and I’ll go through it with ya so ya won’t get too scared. They open it at ‘bout four-thirty so th’ little kids can go too, but if we go, we don’t wanna go till ‘bout seven, when it’s dark. Whaddya think? Wanna go?” He asked for his first date, as a child would beg for a cookie.

“That sounds like great fun, but I explained before, I must ask Poppy.” She cautioned. “I do believe that if I manage my studies and do my chores, he will not have objections to much more than the lateness of the hour. This would mean that I would be back quite late, and the woods are bad enough in the winter, not to mention the dark.”

“If ya’d let me meet him, he might let ya stay at our house one night. He’d like muh dad, everyone does.” He thought this a golden opportunity.

“I am afraid that will not happen for quite some time. You have soiled your honor, and he would not wish to meet you until you have restored it. You see, when you did as you did, you dishonored me as well, and he does not look kindly on anyone who might do so.” She explained with slight disappointment.

“What can I do t’ fix it?” He asked with slight frustration. “There aint no dragons hereabouts that I could fight fer him t’ show what I’d do. Heck, I’m doin’ all I can just t’ see ya again.”

“ Dear sweet Calvin” She began sympathetically. “ Do not worry, I will do everything I can. If you will only be as honorable as I know you can, I believe that I may persuade poppy to be more affable.” Holding his hand in one of hers, and the amulet in the other.

“ I dunno what ‘affable’ means, but if it means easier t’ get along with, then I’m for it.” He said, now embarrassed at his lack of vocabulary. “ So when an where do I look t’ meet ya?”

“ I will have a friend of mine follow you home. She will insure your safety as well as find where to drop you a note from me. As soon as I know something, I will let you know. Just remember, be as honorable as you know how to be, and harm no creatures of the woods. Any creature you harm just may be carrying a message from me.” Winnie did not know if she could convince Gilda to help her, but she had to take this chance and hope for the best.

Calvin wanted to kiss her, but that ‘Honor Thing’ had him confused and extra cautious. He let go of her hand and turned toward the valley. “I’ll be looking t’ hear from ya then. I hope yer as sure of yerself as ya sound t’ be.”

She was disappointed that he did not attempt to kiss her, but she knew he had a heavy burden to bear and he could drop it all with just the slightest slip. “ Expect to hear from me before the weeks end.” She assured him as she waived to him. The feeling in her heart was a new one, one of warmth, yet loneliness in their parting. She waited to see the last glimpse of him pass through the clearing on the top of the next hill below her before turning for home herself. She felt warm inside when she noticed a large black crow flying above and behind his right side.

Hurrying to beat the impending darkness and the cold winds home, she looked about for stinker, hoping she was not laying in wait for Calvin somewhere. Relief came only when she spotted the large black and white hairy patch dashing into a hollow log well ahead of her, only a quarter mile from the Lair.

Merlin was surprised to see her return before Gilda. He was unprepared because there was no report before her arrival. “ I trust you had a good day?” He asked.

“ Yes. It was a very good day.” She responded politely. “ And how was your day?” She asked in turn, as she tiptoed up to kiss him on the cheek.

“ My day was as many before it, and I am certain many after it will be, neither remarkable, nor regrettable.” He answered with a pleasant tone. “ Have you seen Gilda on your way home?”

“She may be slightly late. She is following Calvin to make certain he gets home safely.” She answered.

“ Gilda knows better, her duties are to your safety, not his. What has come over that malingering goof?”

“It is not of her own doing, I asked her to do it as a favor for me. She, I am sure, would not have left my sight had I not asked her to do this for me.” Winnie explained apologetically.

“ For what reason, might I ask, was it of such great importance to impose this dubious deed upon her?” He asked with one raised eyebrow as he turned now to face her. She had begun to hang her sweater back on its hook, but now paused and turned back to face him.

“ I may have need to ask her favors again in the near future. I may require her to carry a note to Calvin for me. I must speak with you and hear what you would say to my requests and then I would have need to send word to him as to the outcome of our talk.” Her face now bore a slight redness as she blushed her answer.

“First things first.” He began as he sat at the table and motioned to her to sit at the other end. “Gilda is a friend, first and foremost. She is my eyes and ears to the outside world secondly; She is your guardian and confidant, among many other things. You should have been told before now, she does not do well at flying after dark, and she does even less well in inclement weather. I will not scold you, nor will I levy any punishment, but I will set you right and from this day forth, there will be no misunderstanding. Any decisions that have reflections on our clan, (this, our happy home and family, if you will.), will be shared with the entirety of the clan and offered for input by the clan as a whole. No decisions that might involve the outside world will be made by, for, nor on the part of anyone without first I have full knowledge of the question and the answer. These are neither rules, nor laws, but more importantly, guidelines that must be followed without question. Our existence here depends upon our anonymity and seclusion from the outside world. Gilda and I have worked very hard at maintaining just that. I have not found it necessary to tell you before now, but to the outside world, the Lair does not exist. It cannot be seen, I have cast a spell upon this entire small meadow, to outsiders it appears as treacherous rocky cliffs, which inhabit no life desirable to man. Each time you venture out, I lift the spell, and upon your return, it is reinstated. No outsider may enter, at any cost. There are a great many things that could interfere with our lives and existence and from this moment forth, you must be very careful not to drop your guard, ask the amulet if you have even the slightest doubt. Because we are not of this time, we can have a very large effect on life itself, as you know it. Not so much in our being here, but more in our returning to our own time. Do you understand what I am saying?” He asked.

“ I believe I understand most of it, but I do not know what you mean when you say you are returning to ‘ your time’. Are you planning to leave me?” She asked, both confused and afraid of being alone again.

“ Winnie, I have been working on just that for all of these long years, and I am still no closer to the end than when I began. I know I should have told you this before, but I did not know just how to say it. You see, the four of us must get back to our own time in order to reset the balance of nature. When I cast the longevity spell, I threw four imperfections into time that would not withstand but the one. I had only planned for Arthur to be effected. Unfortunately, when I thought I was casting on only He, my calculations were off and all life in the room was effected, even some undesirable mold in the mixing room.” He said.

“ You promised me that you would never leave me.” Tears in her eyes and a tremble in her voice, Winnie now felt an old companion emotion creeping into the depths of her heart. “ You promised that you would always be with me, now you are going to leave and take Gilda and Stinker with you. You said you can not lie, but you did.” Her face beginning to wrinkle to cry and tears beginning to stream down her cheeks, she began to rise to go to her bedroom as his soft warm hand reached out and took hers in it.

“Please, do not cry.” He pleaded. “ I knew this would not be good news for you to learn, but it is the truth. I did not lie to you, I will not die, not as you know death. You

see, if ever I am able to complete my work, I will already have been dead for hundreds of years. I will not be dead to you, I will live on in you, and in your magic. Just as I did with the amulet, I will do with all of the magic, I will give you a part of me. When you hold the amulet near to you, do you ever feel alone?"

"No, it gives me comfort and helps me think of other things than my own feelings." She answered, now clutching the amulet tightly in her other hand.

"Do you remember the words I said as I placed it around your neck?" He asked sympathetically.

"Not exactly." She answered slightly embarrassed at her ignorance.

"In the words I committed a part of myself to the amulet, and I also charged it never to allow itself to be taken from your body, alive or dead, save by myself. I will always be alive in the amulet, I am a part of it and it is a part of me. When I give of my magic, I give of myself, and the magic is me. I know that most of this is confusing right now, but you will know just what I say in good time. As you ask of the amulet, does it not answer in the same manner as would I?" He asked, now fighting back a few tears himself.

She had to reflect back for just a brief moment, but yes, now that he brought it up, the thoughts in her mind were just as if he had said them, and not so much like those she had known before. "Does that mean that when I am alone you can see me?" She asked surprised.

"No, I can not see you through the amulet. I cannot hear you either. The amulet has a part of me that would guide you and teach you. It knows how to answer your questions in the way you can understand. It came from the innermost depths of my mind and abilities, that part of me I no longer have, but have not had need for, for more years than I can even reflect. I have only done this sort of deed but one time before in my entire life, and Moranda abused my generosity. I believe, with every fiber of my being that you are of much stronger and better quality than she. I know that you will not abuse your gifts. I know this even more now, because you know that I exist in the amulet and through it, neither can you forget me, nor I you. You should know, once it is gone from you, so then am I, and all of its powers. That is why I charged it to never allow separation of the two of you by any other than I. In that I will be with you always." He attempted a lengthy explanation.

All of this had just complicated things. Now she did not know just how to ask him if she could go to meet with Calvin, or, even worse yet, stay in town, in the outside world.

They talked for hours before they realized that Gilda still had not yet returned.

"What will happen to her?" Winnie asked.

"She will most likely find a tree to spend the night in and attempt returning in the morning." Merlin answered trying to sound more lighthearted than he felt.

"But what if it is still snowing in the morning? It had been snowing for over an hour before I made it back." She offered.

"Go see if you can find Stinker. He can see in the dark, and he can find her and guide her safely back." Merlin directed.

The two of them spent hours searching for Stinker and were about ready to give it up when Merlin caught a slight scent of skunk wafting through the tall snow-laden trees. Not being absolutely certain it was emanating from a friendly source, he followed it with

caution until it was too pungent for mortal man to withstand. With his last good strong breath he yelled, “ You may turn it off now Stinker, I am here. Gilda, are you there?”

After a long silence and growing fear that he had followed his suffering nose down a painfully wrong path, a slight crunch in the snow came through the trees to his left. Eyes open wide enough to absorb what remains of light there was, he turned his head to see a large odd shaped object wobble slowly from right to left and inch slowly in his direction. It took all of his imagination to finally sort out a large snow covered crow, perched on the back of a nearly buried three legged skunk, which was doing all it could to lumber through the dense snow and underbrush without brushing off a silent and thankful passenger. He rushed over to them calling for Winnie and letting her know he had found them. He plucked Gilda up and wrapped his scarf around her, then he sat her safely upon his shoulder and reached down for Stinker. Stinker was not as willing for affection as was Gilda. He was not going to be carried, though, he was thankful to be rid of the passenger. Gilda mumbled and grumbled all of the way back to the Lair. Once inside, Merlin did not take off his coat and boots like usual, but rather, went straight for the perch next to the hearth. With her safely perched, he began unraveling the scarf to which loud squawks and complaints began rumbling in torrents.

“ I am truly sorry I got you into this mess.” Winnie offered with heartfelt sorrow. “ I should have known the storm was so close. I did not think. I will not ask you to do anything so dumb again.”

“ Your apology is accepted!” Snapped Gilda. “ I am not so upset with you as I am the two boys who tried to stone me in town and made me so late.”

“ Did they hurt you?” Asked both Merlin and Winnie together.

“ No. Their aim was as bad as their manners. I just do not understand what causes boys to be so malicious.” She grumbled.

“ How did that make you so late?” Winnie asked.

“ I had followed your friend all of the way to town, until he stopped to talk to another boy. I was not about to circle endlessly, so I set down on a stop sign and the two hooligans began throwing stones at me. In my effort to evade them, your friend set about his way and I lost him. I flew from house to house peering and peeking in windows like a vagrant until I finally caught him sitting to dinner with his family.” Gilda explained with irritation.

“ I am so sorry, I won’t blame you should you refuse to help me again.” Winnie apologized again.

“ I will accept only so many apologies, then I will ignore you completely!” Gilda replied with her head cocked hard to the right.

“Where did stinker find you?” Merlin asked.

“At the base of the crevice. I had flown right into it and fallen into the snow. I was only just gaining my senses back when he nearly scared me to my death. He is so quiet and the wind was in his favor, all I had seen was the snow moving toward me, I thought it must be a badger or lynx and I knew I would be a good night meal.” She answered, now sounding more thankful than irritable.

They talked and carried on for another two hours at which time Winnie could stay awake no more. She rose from the large, comfortable chair, bent over Merlin who was laying on the rug in front of the hearth, and kissed him tenderly on the cheek. “ Good night. I will hold you in my dreams until I can hold you again when I awaken.” She bid

him, as she had on most of the other nights. She turned to Gilda, bowed her head slightly and said; “ I am truly glad you have returned safely, and I will make it a point to return not only the love, but all of the kindnesses I receive as well. You have been a true friend and guardian, I hope I can be equal in return. Thank you, and I love you both. After tonight, I know I have the best family, good night.”

They both bid her good night, almost in unison and watched her as she nearly staggered to her room. After the door closed behind her, they talked into the early hours of the morning. Merlin felt they both needed a break from their nightly chores, and Gilda did not argue.

Winnie was not surprised to find them still sitting near the hearth when she emerged from her room the next morning. She did not have time for more than a hurried “Good mornin’.” As she shot straight into the ‘little room’, she was too tired when she went to bed, now she had to tend to business. She emerged at a much slower pace, ambled over and kissed Merlin, and went to the perch where Gilda was. “ Gilda, I know you are a bird, but after my dream last night and what happened yesterday, I feel you are much more. Would you mind if I were to kiss you on your beak?” She asked reverently.

“If it will give you any pleasure, then yes, you may. But I do not think we should make an ongoing habit of it” Gilda was more pleased with the idea than she cared to let on.

Winnie reached up to kiss her on the beak and Gilda reached downward enough to allow the sentiment. A slight peck rendered, and both of them felt better afterward, although Gilda would never admit to feeling anything.

“ A dream you say?” Merlin asked with more than just passing interest. “ Would you care to share it with me over breakfast?”

“ Actually, I had hoped you would ask.” She responded, nearly skipping to the table. She sat down in her usual place and pulled her plate a tiny bit closer to her, then, fidgeting with her fork and acting as if she were inspecting its cleanliness, she began. “ My dream was a curious one, with people I have never seen before. Gilda was there and you were there, but you were quiet. It seemed as though everything you had said was nearly in whispers, and Gilda hardly spoke at all.

There were ghosts and goblins, witches and ghouls. All sorts of scary things, even some I could not identify, but odd as it may be, I do not recall being scared. Instead, I was happy to see them, and I enjoyed each new one I came upon.

There were treats of many different kinds, and friendly faces that greeted me at every house. I seemed to be going from house to house looking for new faces, and finding them too.

Gilda was flying from roof to roof in the dark and watching me in the scant light cast from the front of each house. There were pictures of scary things in the windows, and scarecrows in the front yards.

I was robed in a long blanket on which were pinned stars of different sizes and a large moon in the center of the back, a lot like your favorite robe. I seemed to be having great fun, and there was someone with me, I could not see who, but I do believe it was a boy. It could have been Calvin, I am not certain, I do not remember seeing his face. We laughed and ran through the town, and Gilda followed above.

But there seemed to be some dark shadow following us and I knew that if I were to turn and face it, it would end the fun and I would be very sad. I remember, once I

turned and almost looked at it and I got a cold chill and goose bumps. But what was really odd, was that I thought it looked like Stinker and I had not even seen it. It looked like him, but his eyes were very sad and seemed to look deep into my own as if he were asking me to do something that I could not

There were three girls there and we made jokes and laughed and had fun too, but one of them only pretended to like me. I knew she was evil, something in her eyes was shiny and seemed to make fun of me. I do not remember looking into the eyes of the others, but her eyes were all I could seem to see when I looked at her.

You seemed to be telling me to be careful, watch my actions, and not to use the amulet against my fears. You had seemed to be between all of the houses, whispering something different each time I saw you. Sometimes I could not understand exactly what you were saying, and I would ask ‘what?’ and you would try to say it again, but most of the times I could not hear you and the girls would ask who I was talking to. It was as if they could not see nor hear you at all. I guess only I could see you. I remember that I woke up very sad and crying, I do not remember what had made me cry, but I do remember running hard to get back to you and Gilda and the Lair.”

Merlin had sat very quiet and without changing his expression throughout the story. Now, when she had taken a long deep breath and released in a soft sigh, she looked to have question and doubt, yet a good deal on her mind. “Your dream is one of great curiosity, and it gives room for concern.” He began to explain and attempt to offer some relief. “I know you to be a good deal more responsible than most girls your age, I trust you to take the right turn in any path you take. Your dream tells of the desires you have, some fears you need to overcome, some you may never, and a strong yearning that needs to be tended to. Gilda has told me of your desires with your young friend. You need not bring him to meet me; I will trust your judgment, as I know you would never do anything that would not sit well with me. I will trust you to do the right thing, and be on your best behavior in my absence. Gilda will check in on you as often as she can, but you must make certain that she is safe as well. You will both be expected to watch out for the other. As for Stinker, it is near his time to take a winter nap; he will not be available to lend a hand for neither you, nor Gilda. There will be no flying after dark and no journeys in inclement weather. I know the Finch place well; I will accompany you to their back fence. When you are ready to return you must remember to hold the amulet tightly, close your eyes, concentrate on seeing my face. When you have my face in full view you must think hard, think just as if you were speaking aloud and tell me where you are. If I respond, I have heard you, if I do not, you must concentrate harder, do not allow any other thought enter your mind, no matter how important it may seem. This you can only do with your mind clear and set on this thing only. You can ever and always contact me in this way, but should the amulet be dark in the center, release it and clear it. You can only clear it by remembering the day you received it and the words I used to commit it unto you, this is very important. You must learn the words, there are only two living beings who may clear the amulet, they are the ones of whom it is and always will be. This is the beginning of your journey into the realm of magic, and it is most crucial that you master this one quickly, and thoroughly. I had hoped that I would have more time to begin your training, but you are growing in your mind much faster than I had anticipated, your other chores and learning may come later, but this is most important for now.”

Leaning back in his great throne shaped chair, he raised his eyebrows, half smiled, and with pride filled voice he asked, “do you have any questions?”

“Yes, I do.” She answered. “As you would say, ‘first things first’, How did you know I was going to ask if I could go to the town?”

“Your dream was not a total revelation, Gilda is, as I have told you, my eyes and ears. Last night we sat up all night talking and she revealed what I needed to know. She does not tell me everything, but she does tell me what I have need to know. She is a good confidant, to both of us, but she will keep nothing from me should I insist. She speaks well of your friend, but she has a shadow of doubt where his honor is concerned. She said he comes from a nice home, and it would seem as though his parents are loving and responsible.” He answered with a slight nod of his head in approval.

“My dream, you said it showed of things, things that I do not understand. Will you tell me about these things?” She asked patiently.

“Right as of now, you need not know of some, but the witches, ghosts and such were not of concern, as they neither harmed, nor bothered you. The friend you knew to be with you is for now a friend, and not of concern. As for seeing me, I am ever present with you, but because you could not always hear me, you would either ignore me, or be unable to know what I would have you do, but you will not forget me, nor betray my trust. As for Gilda, she is as she is in your life, and you acknowledge her. Now, this dark ominous shadow, this disturbs me. You say you did not look at it directly?” He asked.

“No, I was too scared to look right at it, I knew I would not like what I seen, and I knew it would mean that all of the fun I was having would come to an end.” She answered with concern in her voice.

“But when you did see it, it bore resemblance to Stinker?” He asked as if puzzled.

“Yes, I saw his eyes. They looked sad and in pain. He looked deep in my eyes and it was like I could hear his thoughts. But he was all blurry and close up to me.” She answered, near tears and not knowing why.

Merlin knew that he had better let the rest go for now, he had heard enough anyway. “It is not for you to worry, I know we will have many good days with him yet. For now, we had better discuss your venture into the town.” He thought this would take her mind away from unpleasant matters.

“We should, but I would like to know what my dream said of Stinker. Did it say he would be hurt?” She persisted.

“I am afraid so.” He explained. “I believe that you have seen the end of him. Although, it cannot be too soon. Stinker goes in for his winter nap pretty soon and will not be around to be harmed for some time yet.”

“He will not be going to town, but what if something happens to him while I am gone?” She asked, concerned that her departure may trigger Stinker’s mishap.

“He will be fine, he will sleep in the same place he has always, under the lair. Nothing will bother him there.” Merlin assured her. “Now just how long do you plan to be gone?” He asked.

“I am not sure, just how long to be. The night that we wish to meet is Halloween, but he said that the fun would last well after dark. He offered to allow me to stay at his house with his family. Would it be too much to stay the night and return early the next day?” She asked.

“ Well, that will require some good thinking. For now, suffice it to say, yes, you may go on Halloween.” He answered with reluctant deliberation.

“Tell me, I do not remember much of Halloween, do I need to get dressed up?” She asked.

“ Yes.” He explained, bearing a smile brought on by fond memories. “ We will help you to dress as a true magician. I can teach you some simple alchemy, which will enlighten your evening and will be sure to please the gift-givers. You see, on that eve, all of the children dress in costumes. Disguised, they trek through the township knocking on the doors of all of the lighted houses. When the doors are opened, they proclaim in a loud voice, ‘ Tricks for treats!’ At the option of the person who opens the door, a treat is then rendered into a bag held by the trickster, or a trick must be performed to entice the treat. This has been a tradition for a good many years, and some things may have changed, you may have to rely on your good senses, and your friend to guide you through.”

“ Oh poppy!” She exclaimed, now sitting forward and placing both hands and arms on the table fully extended. “It sounds like such fun, I wish you could come and share in it with me. When can we start on my magician clothing?”

“ You need not worry about that. For now, you have many chores to do and I must gather some powders and dusts for your first mixings. You must study and practice that you should not err on the night of your debut. I will not allow you to present yourself as a rank armature, but you must not allow anyone to know any of what I teach you, for any reason.” He knew it was not necessary, but ‘ Precaution precludes perfidy’ as he had been known to say.

With that precaution, he rose to his feet and turned toward the mixing room. Winnie was close behind and caught up to him with a girlish skip. As they entered the mixing room Merlin went directly to a large wooden chest under the bench on the east side of the room. Bending down to retrieve it from its storage, he grunted a small grunt and directed Winnie to clean off the short bench near the doorway. He dragged the large chest out just enough that the shelf above would not hinder opening it and he knelt in front of it. He was unaware of the boyish grin that had mischievously spread across his wrinkled old face. His mind was remembering the time so many years ago, when the contents of this box were, to him, the entire magnitude of the world of magic. The dust rolled in a large cloud when he blew across the top, and the hinges moaned with antiquity and lack of use as he turned the old clasp and opened the large lid. A musty smell of moldy old papers and dust billowed out to greet the nose of a long lost friend. He extracted several small leathery pouches, all were tied with strings of differing colors, and a couple had etchings on the bottom. Reading the etching nearly turned the grin into full laughter. He may have laughed aloud had it not been for Gilda flying in through the window and remarking mockingly; “ I knew you would be wearing that silly expression as you opened that box. I would not have missed that for the gold of the kingdom. Do you remember the words you used when you pushed that under there?”

“Yes, I do.” He responded, the smile now disappearing and giving way to a much more stern expression. “ I’ll thank you to keep what was, where it is and let what will be come to replace what is.”

“ As boys shed their toys...” Gilda started.

“I remember the words, Gilda!” Merlin interrupted. “That was a very long time ago, I was filled with strange fantasies and even more strange and romantic notions. Now, if you please, we have some training to attend.

“Why will you not repeat the opening incantation? You committed it and yourself, remember.” She teased.

“I will have you to know, I opened the box one other time since then.” He quipped. “I did the opening and I resealed it with a silent one. Besides, there is nothing of real danger in here any longer. The large beasts had long been gone when last I opened this, I nullified many of the flight and fire notions and stored the rest in much safer places.”

“You could make things fly and fire from the things in that box?” Winnie asked, turning from her cleaning.

“No, not the things in this box now.” He answered. “A good many years ago, when I first began, this box held my notions and potions. I kept many powders, dusts, and mixing agents in here. I had need to hide it from prying eyes and curious hands. At one time, I had the ingredients to mix and conjure a wide and varied number of differing dragons in this box. Now all of the large beasts are gone and the spells that made them come to life rest quietly within the confines of this old head, and there they are to stay for all time. There was a romance in conjuring some of them up, and a beauty to watch others form. It was like a graceful dance, as they swirled in the smoke and mist emitted by the mixed notions and potions. They would swirl and swim in the air above, growing and transforming, turning first one color, then another. I like to liken it to the northern lights, only you cannot touch nor smell the lights. Not to mention, the lights are never as near.” His eyes were shining with fond reminiscence; the yearning for years and events past was quite obvious.

Winnie walked over to where he was kneeling and sat down on the stone floor next to him. She looked into the box and saw containers of all sorts and instruments like no other she had seen before. Some were tarnished, but none looked rust laden nor in ill care. She wanted to reach inside and touch or hold several different objects, but she had learned early in their relationship ‘uninvited is rarely the best guest’, she contained her curiosity and awaited the invitation. The amulet was glowing with a light pink glow although she failed to notice it, Merlin did not. This he recognized as a warm and passionately curious reflection. He reached into the box and retrieved a cloth belt-like object. It looked like a bandoleer, only much lighter of construction and it fastened with strings that would tie the ends together just below the chest. He extended it toward her, lowered it over her head and instructed her as to where to put her arms through. It was obvious that it was much too large for her and would need some modifications. The laughed at the fit and he marked it in a couple of places where he would take it in. She was reluctant to give it back so soon; she wanted to wear it now. It meant very much to her that he would entrust his own artifacts to her, it was much the same as a mother handing down precious heirlooms to a daughter. She took it off and handed it to him. He assured her that it would be ready for her tomorrow when she awakened. He explained to her that all of the pouches would fit onto it as well as other ornaments that she would have to know well before she would be allowed to leave for the town. He handed her two of the pouches, one with etching, and one without.

“This one is quite harmless.” He said pointing to the one without etching. “This one, you must be very careful as to how much you mix with what powder, and must never mix with vinegar nor oil. Much the same caution would apply to any paraffin, like wax, grease, road tar, and many others. For now, mix it only with what I tell you, and nothing else. As you learn to mix, pay close heed to your amulet, it will warn you, it will help you to remember cautions, and it can even help you to learn new applications. I had no such amulet when I dabbled in these; there are always a good many applications that can be learned. Do no experimenting until you have learned and applied the lessons I have to give you first.”

“What is in the other ones?” She asked.

“ You will learn of them in good time. You must learn one thing at a time. When you have mastered these, then you will be ready for more. Alchemy is tricky, should you fail to begin correctly, you may miss and never regain some very important steps. Walk first, child, skip, then and only then can you run your best gate. I will assure you, you will have enough time to learn what I would have you to know when you need it. Things may be done in haste, but learning will never be, anything learned in haste is only partially learned and partial learning is no learning.”

She rose from the floor and offered a hand to him, which he accepted graciously. She wanted to mix and make magic right now, but she was learning even now, patience is the best teacher. They talked for a few more hours and she dusted and cleaned as they talked. He taught her some names of the powders and even showed her how to mix the two powders in the correct quantities to produce a billowy puff of white smoke. Mixing them was much easier than the way she had to rub her fingers on them, tightly and fast to make them seem to melt to a clay-like substance, and then throw them hard to the ground at the correct density, and hard enough to make them seemingly explode. She made several attempts before her first success. If it were not the mixture, then the density or she did not throw it hard enough, or too soon. Now she could see that magic would not be as simple a task as first she had thought. She did grow slightly frustrated, but she refused to let this be a problem, she wanted to do magic and she was going to do it at any cost. Just as she was at the height of her frustration, she noticed the amulet was dull and an off gray color. She stopped what she was doing, held it tightly in her left hand and closed her eyes. She began feeling more at ease almost immediately, and her thoughts became clear. She seemed to know now what was wrong with her method. As soon as she felt confident, she released the amulet and opened her eyes. It hung in place with a light pink glow and felt warm against her chest. When she attempted the feat again it went well, right up to the point where she threw it to the ground. When she threw it, it splattered on the floor and scattered like a broken ice cube. At first, she felt failure, and then she realized she had to remain calm and think. Tracing her steps, she found that everything was done correctly right up to, but not including the throw to the ground. She thought about it for a moment, almost turned to the amulet again, then, it came to her; she held it too long and threw it too hard. She mixed again, moving her arms back and forth, and waving them in the air as Merlin had taught her to, then, just as the mixture turned warm and malleable, she threw it to the ground and a large white puff of smoke arose with a loud bang. She jumped, just as much from the sound as from the surprise that she had succeeded at last. They were both happy with her success, although, Merlin was not as surprised as was she. He convinced her to perform the feat four more times to embed

it into her memory and assure skill over luck. As she went through the ensuing attempts, he instructed her to change the mixture slightly to vary the loudness of the ‘pop’ and control the smell. She became worried that she may run out of powder and did not wish to waste it. Merlin assured her that the powders could easily be replaced and did not require much effort at all. After all, the very powder she was using had been in that pouch for well over a couple of thousand years and had lost some of its better qualities. When she had used all of what she had, he would teach her how to “Work up” a replacement.

“Well now, that is a stench I have not missed and need not be reminded emanates from a budding young magician’s feeble attempts at impressionism.” Gilda remarked as she flew in from the ‘Great Hall’ as Winnie had renamed it.

“We do not need doubting comments.” Merlin responded. “She is doing quite well, we all had our trial and error period, I do believe hers will be a short one”.

Gilda bowed her head and closed her eyes. “My most humble apologies to the lady of the realm. My insult was out of place and wouldst thou spare my humble head, I should promise never to cast such darkness upon thy honorable efforts and deeds again.” She mocked.

Winnie was near to laughter, but maintained as serious an expression as she could. Walking over to the foot of the perch where Gilda remained bowed down she lowered her eyebrows and wrinkled her mouth. Holding her head high and regal, she addressed Gilda in response. “Would it not be for the fact that I have no need for a the head of a surly crow with a quick tongue, I would just as leave have you plucked and left to freeze in the harshness of the winter. It does happen, I do have grave need of the services thou could render wouldst thou be willing and disposed to honor thy foul priors.”

Gilda opened her eyes full, raised her head slowly and sat low on her perch. Only slightly raising her head she answered the offer; “My honor has been diminished, my position disposed, I would honor the lady’s wish only for complete exoneration, and restoration. Though it is not customarily the right of the lady to set my way to right, the lord of the house obviously would see fit to allow our dealings. I know it is not for me to bargain to restoration, please allow this is only a request, my service will diminish not should you not grant my salvation. My life has become thine to deal with as thou would, I bid thee, be as thou would.”

Winnie fondled her amulet, turning with her head down and looking at the floor as if in serious deliberation she paced the stone floor to and fro. Suddenly she stopped and turned to face her adversary. “I would give thee leave for thought, I give thee one week in full service unto me at my need slip thee once and I will have thee plucked clean to the tail and head, bound to a dead tree and watered down that ice should bind thee for eternity. Fulfill thy duty and I will consider exoneration and restoration, but forgiveness.....that comes now.” She finished the charade in loud laughter.

Merlin had been seated near the door and watching with an uncontrollable grin, and now he applauded and cheered with joy. Winnie turned to face him and bowed graciously, spreading her dress and placing one foot behind the other as she bent at her waist and knees and bowed her head.

They only laughed and talked a short while longer before Merlin sent Winnie off to get her beauty rest. Then he set about making the harness fit to her size and putting the remainder of the contents of the box on the shelves and in drawers. When Gilda had

asked why he was dredging out the past and storing it in the present, he explained that his beginning was not such a bad one and it would fit nicely in Winnie's future. "To learn a little slight of hand and deception could do her no harm. Deception is good in the entertainment aspect, and it should do nicely to show that all things have a good side and often a good use....given time to notice and awareness while looking."

"She is a good girl, and she should easily learn the difference between good deceit and misuse. She does seem a good study and picks up quite readily." Gilda complimented.

"Does this mean that you are growing to like her?" Merlin asked, with a coy sound to his voice.

"Yes, I do believe it does." Gilda conceded.

"Then does it also mean I am forgiven and I was not so wrong in bringing her here from the plane?" This time Merlin had an 'I told you so' attitude in his voice.

"This is not my night!" Said Gilda, ruffling her feathers. "I did not mind so much going through this with her, but must you also have sport with me? There is nothing to forgive, I do like her, and actually, I am quite fond of her. As for bringing her here from that dreadful wreck, you had little choice, I agree, but I was not certain that you should have made this her home. Neither one of us can be certain of anyone again, we have trusted so many and been deceived just as many times. We could not then be certain of what she would be like and I am not so certain we should let go our guards just as yet. She is a delightful girl and she has taken on so many of your ways, and I am sure, some of my own as well, but she is human, and in these times who is to know just what to expect of whom or when?"

"We have been together for a vast number of years. We have seen a good many sights, and shared many experiences together. We are closer than any two living creatures in creation since our births. The one binding factor that holds us so tight is our trust; it is our interdependency and our commonality. Were it not for that, I dare say we would have drifted apart well before we began. If we can be so much to each other for that one strong reason, then can we not extend our shield to afford the same to someone so small and alone in this vast world? She has no other to take her in so readily, and she offers so much delight to our antiquated and dismal existence. I do believe that of all of the attempts I have made to extend my abilities and offer inheritance, this one is the most capable, honest, and willing to accept the responsibilities. I also believe her heart is true and gives freely to us all a heart can give. Her intentions are pure and not born of gratitude so much as true love and devotion. There, I believe, lies the one true quality that will make her a great magician, not to mention the other accomplishments I know she can achieve. In times past, she would have all of the inner qualities of nobility. I found that she had not been abandoned, but rather, her parents were killed, as were her mothers. Her mother was an only child, and her father left a short trail of family ties, most of which were taken by disease which had played itself out by the time it reached her split in the genealogy. She has no others; we have room in the lair and our hearts, not to mention the darkened space in our lives, which she has so aptly lighted. I trust her, and I bid you do the same, if I am wrong, time will tell and we will deal with it when we must." Merlin parlayed.

"I too, as I have said, have grown to be quite fond of her. I can no more prevent my feelings for her than can you. But I am wary. I fear the unknown factors about

humans. Over the past few months I have been feeling some of the emotions emitted by humans toward non-human lives and I must say, it is very disquieting. I do not feel the same of you, but around others it is very strong, not so much around her, but I fear it may grow. It is odd, though, I sometimes feel it even when I am alone and that bothers me. It were as if I were part human, that in itself is an ugly thought. If you can conjure up a cure, then please, cure me of that feeling.” She shuddered and ruffled her feathers.

Little did she know, this was just one of the ‘cures’ Merlin had been working on all of these years.

When Winnie arose the next day, she was surprised to find them both asleep in the main chambers. Merlin was sprawled out in front of the fireplace and was wearing his robe, that told her he slept there intentionally. Gilda was sleeping on a large stone that formed a part of the hearth. The fire had died down to a few small embers in the bottom and the heat was low now. Being careful so not to awaken them, she eased another few small branches into the fireplace, and blew on the coals to get them started. When the flames were strong enough, she laid a larger log on the top and set back to watch it grow. She sat for a while watching the flames dance and feeling the warm air on her face and bare toes. She thought of how lucky she was to have such a loving place to live and someone who really cared. She remembered the feeling she had had before when it seemed that she was being constantly being groomed for sale, or rent. Everything had to be right so that the next family might take her to her dream home. This home was far from anything she ever thought of as a dream home, but it felt so much better than she had ever dreamt a home could feel. She was certain she was loved here, she felt wanted, needed, and welcome, and she felt that the feelings were mutual. With her knees under her chin and her arms around her legs, she tucked her gown around the end of her toes and turned to look at Merlin. She had not seen him sleep many times, but this time he seemed comfortable and deep in his sleep. She wondered about what he might be dreaming, was it her that brought about that faint grin? The log on the fire popped a loud pop and Gilda ruffled and awoke. Winnie pressed her forefinger to her lips and signaled for quiet so as not to awaken Merlin who had stirred and repositioned, but not awakened. Again, she watched him sleep, his eyes moving under their lids as if searching for something to see in a dark place. He did not snore but his breathing was deep and rhythmic. Gilda stepped down from the stone and walked slowly to her side. She looked first at Winnie, then at Merlin. If ever a bird could smile, this would be the time. She could see in Winnie’s eyes that Merlin was right and she knew then and there that theirs would be a lifetime bond. The thing she felt that humans had about non-humans was very faint in Winnie now and she believed it would subside in time.

Winnie reached out with a small warm hand and stroked Gilda one long slow stroke from her head to the end of her tail feathers. Then she whispered; “Have you two been here long?”

“Only a couple of hours, he wanted to sleep here last night. He said his bed was too cold and he did not wish to build a fire in his quarters.” Gilda’s voice was deep and slow as she tried to keep as quiet as she could.

“I do not get to watch him sleep often, it is good to see that he does and that he seems to enjoy it so.” Winnie whispered. “He is so good to me and he works so hard all

the time, I wish I could do something to show how much he means to me, and how thankful I am.”

“ You can, and you do already.” Gilda affirmed. “ You do more than you know in just returning the affections he gives. And you can only do more by honoring his sacred trust; never betray him in any way. Always keep his secrets between only you two, and keep him ever close to your heart. He values more your honor and integrity than any gifts or deeds, be as he teaches and do his bidding when the time comes and you will never do more for anyone. He has need of you in the future and you must study hard to render him service. You are not a servant, nor a mere apprentice, I fear he has in his heart, adopted you. He feels as though you were his own daughter and he has made you a part of his existence.”

The amulet was now a full and warm pink; it emitted enough color and light to attract Winnie’s eyes. When she seen it she held it tightly in both hands and held back the sudden urge to cry. As she held it, she sensed that this was the family she was born for and here is where she belonged. She knew that she would be testing the boundaries of their world in various ways, but she knew unequivocally that she loved him as she would a father and not even time could stop that.

Then, without notice, the amulet turned almost red and she thought of Gilda. Somehow, she was seeing Gilda as three and she knew that in order for them to be separate she was going to be instrumental. She tried desperately to see what she had to do, but it was not clear. She had to go to the town, not just for fun, but for another reason. Something had to happen, and she needed to learn something about science, something about the stars and the universe, something... “Oh! What could it be?” She did not mean to, but she blurted it aloud enough that Merlin stirred and broke her concentration. Now it was all gone. The amulet was clear, all except for the ever-present soft pink hue in the center. She lowered a hand down in front of Gilda and waited for her to step onto it. Then she carried her to the perch by the table and continued into the little room. When she re-emerged she went to the cupboards and drew down the cloth sack containing what they referred to as ‘mush’, retrieved a small boiling pot from the lower cupboard and filled it with water from the stream. She wanted to watch Merlin some more, so she put the pot by the fire in the main chamber. Then, being careful not to let it drag and awaken him, she turned the large throne-like chair slightly to allow a better view of the tall old man on the large furry rug. She watched him and drifted off into thought, pondering what he might have in mind for her. She wondered about what sort of magic he might teach her today and what was yet to come. Would she ever be as good as he would like her to be? How many ‘tricks’ would she need to learn before she could begin on the ‘real thing’? On and on her mind wandered, but never once did she touch on how long she would live here, nor when she would be allowed to venture into the outer world to live. It never once entered her mind as to what kind of life she should have when she grew to be a woman, nor where she might be after she grew to maturity. No, her mind was filled with respect, love and admiration for the family life she had now and the many wondrous things that could possibly lie in store for her. She was only now becoming aware that she was the only child in present existence that was fortunate enough to live a fantasy life with the most exotic hero imaginable. She knew that most people today thought that Merlin was only a myth and could not believe that he not only existed, but also had taken her in as his own. Not to mention entrusted the greatest secrets of the ages to her with

love and confidence. Small splatterings of water spewed out of the pot and hissed themselves to a steamy oblivion now as the water came to a full boil and stirred her attention to the here and now again. She picked up the potholder and lifted the handle on the pot with it; the handle slipped and clanged against the pot, not loud, but just enough to awaken Merlin. She turned quickly to see large blue eyes blinking, refocusing and looking back into her own. The expression on his face was that of complacency and ease.

“I am sorry.” She apologized. “I tried not to awaken you. I was enjoying watching you sleep. You seemed so peaceful and rested. You must have been tired. Did you get enough rest?”

“Yes. Thank you, I did and thank you for allowing me to. I did need the rest and my dreams have told me of things we need to do very soon.” He answered.

She carried the pot to the table, poured some of the water onto the waiting ‘mush’, and asked as she stirred it slowly. “I have prepared the water, would you care to have a bowl of mush with me?”

He rolled onto his back and began to rise as he looked at her and responded. “I do believe I would. Today feels like a good mush day and I thank you for offering. You know we have much to do today. I must check the fit and show you how to use the bandolier. It takes considerable getting use to.”

“Did you get it finished to my size?” She asked.

“I do believe so. It will be maladroit at first, then with use you will learn to appreciate its design.” He answered.

“What does ‘maladroit’ mean?” She asked with a puzzled expression.

“It is just another word for ungainly, or clumsy. We magicians must learn a lot of odd words, one of the ways we misdirect attention is to confuse our audience. One way to do that is to preoccupy their minds with thoughts other than what we are doing at the time.” He answered with a smile.

The first bowl was prepared and she pushed it to where he now sat at the table and began to pour the next bowl for herself. “Are there a lot of ‘tricks’ I need to learn?” She asked.

“I am afraid so.” He answered with slightly raised eyebrows. “These I will teach you for a foundation for your future education. Deception is an ugly thing in most cases, but you must learn now that all things have a place in life, even the ugly. If you give yourself enough time and patience to look at all things correctly, you will learn that even the most unappealing has its own form of beauty and a use for good. All things in existence are here for a reason and have purpose, and all things with purpose can be used for good ends. Just as that is so, you should be made aware that all things could be twisted and malformed from their original use to ugly, evil and undesirable. In that, you should be very careful that all you do is left in a finished state and not allowed to be used for harm. Should you create, you also destroy, in so doing you begin an endless reaction, that reaction can be deviated and cause irrevocable harm, most often the instigator of such is the only one who may be its demise as well. The ‘tricks’ are for fun and will help you to see that what I say is true, if the ugliness of deception can be made fun and enjoyable, so then can all things, no matter their appearance nor origin.”

“I think I now what you are saying, and I will ever and always try to be careful. I will never forget that thing I made in the mixing room.” She said. “It was not only ugly, but it smelled terrible when you made it go away.”

“ Death has never been a thing of beauty to me. The smell it emitted was that of its dying disposition. It did not wish to die no more than would you, but it had no true place left in this existence. The only purpose it had was to teach you the lesson you learned that day. But remember, when one dies, another is born to fill its vacancy. The birth of any life is the only true beauty I find in relation to death. It is a hard contradiction, but it is also a fact. I do not find beauty in the fact that some lives are rendered that some others may be sustained by what nourishment it yields. It is ugly, to me, nonetheless, it is still a fact. A fact that I have learned to live with.” He realized that he was beginning to rant and decided to stop there.

IV

Gilda flew out the window to go gather in her own breakfast as they ate and talked.

When they had finished their mush, Winnie gathered up the dishes and began washing them in the large pan they used because they did not have a sink. As she cleaned the dishes Merlin sat musingly at the table. His thoughts were upon just where to start and to what extent he must go with her lessons today, time was closing in on them. She dried her hands and turned to him; “ I have finished, are you ready?” She asked.

He rose to his feet and put a long arm around her shoulders and they walked down the ‘great hall’ together. They stayed in the mixing room all of that day, leaving only for a brief lunch and short ‘little room’ intermissions. Before they had left that evening she had learned all of the names of the powders in the pouches on the bandolier and all of the cautions that accompanied them. She also learned that there were more uses and combinations to be mixed than could be learned in a year, much less the short time she had before she was to exhibit her skills. She now could move her hands and arms gracefully enough as to extract the powders almost unnoticed and almost had the quantities in proper proportions. The ‘fairies trail’ was still giving her some trouble. It required four of the powders and in the incorrect order the sparkling trail that should ensue would often be a trail of flame or sometimes a smelly billow of smoking sparks. She had little trouble learning the smoke tricks, most of them only required two powders and not much redirection. The only smoke trick that gave her trouble was the ‘Lingering Ghost.’ This trick is supposed to produce a thin layer of smoke that is light and thin enough to appear as a transparent ghost. The smoke need be heavy enough to linger a short while, and yet not enough to make it too thick to see through. The mixture had to be perfect, and timing was a big part in allowing it to linger. When she had conquered the mixture, she had trouble with the timing. After several attempts she learned that her timing was fine, she just had to draw her hand away quickly at the end to produce a long and pointy tail. This art of deception is tricky, and if this is so complicated, what could lay in store in the world of real magic? She was growing slightly scared that she might not be able to master anything more complicated than what she was now learning. Her fears were quickly put quiet when Merlin explained to her that she had more time to learn magic than she had now. He also explained that she was now performing a form of magic by mixing the powders to produce a desired effect. The powders needed no incantations, and none that he was aware of would aid the powders in doing what she had need of. That bolstered her confidence and was the speech which inspired her to finish the ‘Lingering Ghost’.

Time seemed to dissolve like sugar in water, now they had only today to finish her gown and put final touches on her skills. They agreed that she would stick to doing only the tricks she had no troubles with. Three days had passed since Gilda had returned with the response note from Cal. All was set in town; he would be at the Finch front gate with his father in their new 1955 yellow and white Chevy pickup truck. Merlin told her again this morning that he would walk her to the back fence of the Finch place. That news filled her heart with great pride, she had never known him to venture past the crevice, now he would prod himself all of the way to the mouth of the valley just to be with her. They worked from early in the morning on final preparations and now it was time to start down the mountain. Merlin had allowed both Gilda and Stinker to come, he could not stop Gilda, but he knew he could keep a closer eye on Stinker in close proximity. As they walked they talked and he helped her refine some tricks she had not yet mastered. He made certain to caution her several times of misuse, and nondisclosure, but she had to stop in her tracks and turn to him and with a big hug and kiss when he mentioned for the fourth time that she must not reveal the whereabouts of her home. She assured him that she would instruct Cal. to tell everyone only that she is his friend from out of town, and if they persisted he could tell them only that she lived in the country and stayed out of town. They both agreed that Gilda would stay close by, if she chose and that Stinker would return to the Lair with Merlin. It was uncertain as to what time they would be ready to quit for the evening, so she agreed to be alone at eleven o'clock and holding the amulet tightly and concentrating on Merlin and the Lair. Now the back fence was in sight and a knot began to grow in Merlin's throat. He felt fear, sorrow and grief, all knotted into one large pain in his heart. He did all that he could to hide it, but Winnie saw right through his trembling smile. She had to fight off tears herself, and wished she could stay and yet still go. Talking became hard for both of them, they both feared that the next word would be the one which would break the dam and neither wanted to be the one to cry. It was very awkward, they had to talk to hide their feelings, yet talking threatened exposure. When they reached the fence Gilda perched on a nearby post and mocked; "Look at you two, both coming apart as if it were the last you would see of one another. I am ashamed of the two of you. You talk of showing one another true respect and honesty, yet neither of you will let go your heart long enough to show the other."

Almost as if they had planned it they both wiped a tear away and yelled in unison; "Gilda, please!" Then they laughed. They turned to one another and hugged, she kissed him on the cheek and he returned it. He raised the second strand of four strands of barbed wire and pressed the third and fourth down with his foot offering her passage through the fence. She ducked through and when she had cleared she turned to him, said thank you and waived a meek good bye. She turned and walked away looking back occasionally to see him still watching her from the fence, with Stinker at his feet. She was careful not to disturb the dogs at the Finch house, staying in the trees and skirting wide. Her heart was still in her throat and she was tempted to turn back until she seen the pickup truck parked at the gate. There were only two in the truck, Cal and his father. She tried not to look too curious, but she could not see Calvin's father through the reflections on the glass windows. As soon as he had seen her, Calvin jumped out of the truck and waived to her as if he thought she might not see him. He helped her into the truck and introduced her to his father.

“Wendy, this is my dad, Mr. Dennis, dad, this is Wendy, the girl I told ya about.”

“Wendy, it is a pleasure, you can call me Ted if ya like.” He said offering a kind handshake.

“My name is Wendy, but I like to be called Winnie if you don’t mind Mr. Dennis.” She responded, lightly shaking his hand. As the door closed behind Calvin her mind envisioned Merlin still standing at the fence and she glanced out the window in his direction, all she could see was the lane leading to the Finch house.

The truck was clean and shiny, and the seats felt deep and comfortable as they roared down the dusty dirt road to town. They made small talk most of the way, and she avoided talking about Merlin, the Lair, and how long she had lived there. She really did quite well at avoiding most of their questions by asking her own, but they did not make it easy. Mr. Dennis announced that they would be eating a good meal at their house before going out. When they arrived at the house Calvin helped her out of the truck and she whispered to him; “I must talk to you before we go any farther, I must.”

“We’ll be right in, Dad.” He yelled across the truck.

“I have made certain promises in order that I might be here now. You must make me some promises or I will be forced to leave.” She said in a most serious voice.

He agreed to all of her terms and wanted to know more, but reluctantly yielded to her secrecy. They had to talk fast so his parents would not grow suspicious. After he agreed, he warned her that his ‘mom’ might be a hard one to get around. “She’s a crafty one. If she goes t’ findin’ somethin’ out, aint nothin’ this side a’ lightenin’ gonna stop her, and some times I think she’d ride lightenin’ t’ find out.” He assured her.

“You just remember, you promised to help me where you can, I expect you to keep your promises at all cost. Remember, your honor has been discolored once, you cannot allow it to become a habit.” She reasserted.

“I know what I said, and I’m a man of muh word. You aint got nuthin t’ worry ‘bout, I’m gonna help ya. I dunno much ‘bout honor ner half of th’ things you worry s’ much ‘bout, but I do know I aint gonna let nuthin spoil this night. You jest leave everything t’ me and follow muh lead. If ya get stuck somewhere, just look like yer thinking real hard and I’ll think of sumthin t’ bail ya out. Jest trust me.....’k?” His instructions were sketchy, at best, but she had little to no choice.

He led her into the house by a slightly reluctant hand, full of anticipation and fear she held on to his leading hand just knowing she would get into trouble. As they reached the door he turned to her and whispered; “Just act normal and she wont expect nuthin, don’t give her no reason t’ go snoopin.”

The door opened and the aroma of fried chicken filled her nostrils, after only two deep breaths, her stomach began growling so loud she was afraid someone would hear it and it would embarrass her to tears. His father had already found his way to the kitchen and was sampling the gravy when they entered. His mother was a woman of about five foot seven, she was of light build with a very tiny waist and light brown hair about shoulder length. The apron she wore was neatly tied in a large bow, which hung about half of the way to the hem of her knee-length pleated dress. She was lifting a large plate of crispy brown chicken from the stove where she had just removed it from the frying pan. She turned around in their direction and faced them full on her way to the table.

“ Calvin, she is adorable. Are you going to introduce us, or are you going to keep her a secret?” She asked setting the plate in the center of the table and looking at Winnie with a large smile and warm shiny eyes.

“ Mom, this is Winnie, the girl I met when I wuz fishin’, Winnie, this is muh Mom, I think you kin call her Mrs. Dennis.” Calvin did the honors the best he knew how.

“ Mrs. Dennis, it is my pleasure, I am sure.” Winnie said with a slight curtsy.

“ My, now aint you just the one?” Mrs. Dennis said marveling at her impeccable manners.

“ Did you make your own costume?”

“ Not me alone, poppy and I made it.” She responded, half timid. “ He made most of it, I just kind of added a few small things.”

“ It’s adorable! You are suppose t’ be a magician, aint ya?” Asked Mrs. Dennis with a large smile of adoration.

“ Yes, I am. I even learned a few tricks to go with it.” Winnie boasted wide-eyed.

“ Maybe you could honor us with one?” Mr. Dennis interrupted.

“ I would be more than happy to, but I think I should do it outside. They kind of leave a smell in the air and I do not think it would go well with dinner.” Winnie confided.

“ I think we should schedule it for after dinner, its cooked and I don’t want t’ wait till its cold t’ eat it. Is that okay Wendy?” Mrs. Dennis asked politely.

“ Winnie, if you please. And I would much rather wait, dinner smells so good I can hardly wait to taste it.” Said Winnie.

“ Winnie it is then, and you sit right here next to me.” Mrs. Dennis stood corrected and pulled out the chair for Winnie. “ It is going to be such a delight havein’ someone around here with some manners and I wouldn’t want you to be too far from me, maybe I can remember some and maybe some just might rub off on t’ me. In any case, I want you as close to me as I can get you.”

Winnie blushed and sat politely in the offered chair, Calvin sat next to her and Mr. Dennis took the seat at the opposite end of the table. The plates were passed around the table from one end to the other, and back and forth, until they were all loaded like a pilgrim’s feast. With each offering, corn, chicken, ‘mashed taters’, and so on just a polite “yes please” was rendered by Winnie. Nothing on the table was undesirable to her taste, and she found it hard to wait without fidgeting until the rituals were through and the eating began. Mrs. Dennis was an excellent cook, Winnie ate until she thought she might explode. Conversation at the table was kept fairly light and of general interest. Things like, where they were going to start their festivities, who they were going with and such. They only made Winnie slightly nervous when Mr. Dennis said that he did not remember ever meeting any of her family and how long they had been in the general area. Before Winnie could swallow the bite in her mouth at the time, Calvin headed it all off by ‘accidentally’ knocking over his glass of milk with an awkward reach for more corn. She did, however, manage to explain that she calls her Dad ‘Poppy’ from an earlier childhood and has never had reason to change it. When asked about her Mother, she only replied that she has never known her Mother and is quite happy with the home life the way it is. No desert was planned, there was to be plenty of that to come. Winnie offered

to help with the dishes, and Mrs. Dennis declined her offer politely and told her to rest a minute so she would have enough energy to perform her trick when they were finished. Mr. Dennis retired to the living room where he sat like a king in his large rocking chair. He lit a pipe of tobacco and spewed long billows of sweet smelling smoke into the air as he watched intently the nightly news on the television. Not all of the people in the neighborhood had a television, but Mr. Dennis took great pride in being one of the first in town to own one. Winnie was impressed, but not mesmerized. She was just beginning to wonder when things would begin, when Mrs. Dennis entered the room and announced that it was time to witness this feat of magic. Everyone arose and headed for the door, Mr. Dennis was a little slow, he wanted to catch the last of that story.

Winnie directed them all to stand on the porch and she stepped down the walk about ten paces. Now waiving her arms about and making inaudible chants, she drew smiles and comments as to how authentic this appeared. Their faces all lit up and expressed delight-filled awe as the trail of stars lighted up the now dim-lit evening sky. She had to perform 'The Lingering Ghost' and 'The Fading Comet' before they reluctantly allowed her and Calvin to begin their evening.

Their evening began at the school gymnasium. The school faculty had put on a Halloween festivity every year in the gymnasium. There was a spook house made of cardboard walls which had the senior drama class students dressed as Dracula in a coffin, Frankenstein, a witch complete with broomstick and black cat, a mad scientist, a large bowl filled with grapes painted to look like eyeballs floating in liquid jell-o, a large spider suspended by fishing line, trap doors with sheet-draped ghosts, and other scary amenities which did, in fact manage to make Winnie draw back and wince a time or two. There was the cake walk, the apple dunking tank, the musical chairs and the movie room where Laurel and Hardy were playing soon to be followed by The Three Stooges, but they did not have enough time to watch both movies. There may have been time, but one of the girls who lived on Calvin's block had witnessed her earlier magic show in front of his house and requested an encore. At first she was evasive and reluctant, she was not certain that she could be skilled enough with such a large audience to remain undetected. Then when the first request was for the 'Ghost' one, her reluctance faded because it was simple enough and her mastery had evolved enough to achieve it without any degree of difficulty. She had no idea that it would impress the captive group so heavily as to draw all of the monsters from the spook alley and the vendors from their booths as she was exhorted to perform more, which included the Fading Comet, but the one that she closed with impressed them all most. Her grand finale was the hardest and she had to stand on a chair in order to perform it, she was too short and the resultant effect would burn the hardwood floor. This one she called the 'Super Nova'. With this one, she would tell the story of the magician who created stars and night skies to win the favors of his beloved. All the while she would be mixing rubbing and spreading sparkles in wide arches which would seem to hang suspended at her command. As the story was told, she would mix and mold in the palm of one hand and spread the dusty stars with the other, all the while building to the climatic end where the jilted magician wreaked vengeance upon an unfaithful paramour with a small ball of flame that grew to enough density as to consume all of the lingering stars and explode itself into tiny bits of slowly falling sparkles. "Never more shall the stars shine in the night skies for you nor the one who hath stolen your heart from me." She dramatically quoted the magician to say. "And from that

night forth both she and her new suitor were blinded from the night stars by the magicians spell.” She bowed and hung her head deeply as an enthused and mesmerized audience rose to their feet and applauded, whistled and chanted aloud for an encore.

Calvin was proud, and at the same time embarrassed, he had never had such a popular friend before and he did not know just how he was to get her out of there. He took her hand and whispered in her ear, “Unless ya got a way t’ make us invisible, ya better quit that stuff now. They aint never gonna get ‘nuff and we gotta get goin’ if were gonna get any candy.”

Winnie was smiling and filled with so much pride that she could have overflowed the gymnasium, yet she knew that she had contain her vanity. Again, she bowed deeply and raised her hands to call for silence without letting go of Calvin’s hand. When the noise had subsided, she addressed the room. “I thank you. I appreciate your kindness, but now we must go. The night is not as young as it was when we began, and we have other things to tend. There will be other nights, and other times. Please allow we should all enjoy this night as you have my magic.” With that, Calvin led the way to the exit. Children of all ages followed after, requesting more magic. The night was filled with a magic of it’s own, and at Calvin’s request, Winnie performed no more. They both agreed it would interfere with the proceedings and would be just as hard, if not harder to put to an end next time. They laughed and ran from house to house gathering the sweet bounty of the holiday, Winnie even thought she caught a glimpse of a large black bird flying from a streetlight but did not mention it.

As the evening drew near to eleven the amulet began to glow and feel warm against her skin. She had kept it hidden underneath to avert attention; she did not wish to explain it. They had just left a house with large pumpkins neatly carved and set upon the gateposts to light the entry to the yard. Winnie stopped, turned to Calvin and looked up into his eyes and with reservation said; “I am having so much fun, but I must be alone for just a few moments, could you help me find a secluded place?”

“Oh! Heck yes, I know jest th’ place!” he answered excited and misled. Winnie knew she should have corrected him, but she thought she should at least see where he had in mind.

“I aint never took nobody here, but I go her a lot when I wanna be alone. I sometimes come here jest t’ get away and think. Ya know?” He talked slower than usual, and walked with a different stride as he led her to the park behind the swimming pool. He turned to her and reached to embrace her when she was forced to correct the misleading injustice she had allowed go too far.

“No, I am sorry. That is not what I had in mind. I meant I must be alone, just for a few moments. I must concentrate on one thought and I must be alone to do so, just for a couple of minutes, please. Is there some place where I will not be disturbed?” She asked, almost sorry she stopped his clumsy attempt at romance.

“Scuse me!” He responded, embarrassed and blushing. “Yea, ya won’t be bothered in th’ doorway to th’ girls showers, aint nobody gonna go there t’night. It’s th’ last place eny girl’s gonna go t’night, and aint no boy gonna wanna get caught near there.” He said, leading her as he talked.

The doorway was down a short hall and was unlighted. She could not see to the end, but she knew it would do just fine for her present needs.

“This will do fine.” She confirmed. “Now, please, do not allow anyone to come near me, and please do not disturb me. I promise, I will be fine and I will be right back to you in just a few moments. I promise.” She walked down the hallway looking back at him every second step. As she walked, she withdrew the amulet and covered it to hide the glow. It was brighter than it had been ever before, and it was warm to the touch, it almost felt to be throbbing. She had to hold it in both hands, and even then it shone through enough to prompt Calvin’s curiosity.

“What th’ heck is that?” He asked, taking a step in her direction.

“It is just a secret light I keep, do not worry, and do not come in here. Please go around the corner and allow me to be completely alone, for just a few moments, please.” She pleaded.

It was now eleven and she could feel Merlin’s presence without concentrating. Calvin had stepped around the corner as she had requested and sat on the garbage can that was propped against the wall.

She had only been undisturbed for a short moment when Merlin’s likeness appeared in her tightly closed eyes.

“Poppy, I see you!” She exclaimed aloud.

“Yes, and I see you.” He responded. “You needn’t close your eyes so tightly, and in time, you will be able to see me without closing them at all.”

She relaxed her eyes and was thrilled to see him still. She was brimming over with questions and excitement, so many things she wished to tell him and ask as well. All would need wait until the matters at hand were tended and even then, some would need wait for some time to come.

“Where are you?” She asked.

“I am at the fence where last we spoke. I knew you would be wanting me to walk you from here when you are through there.” He answered.

“How did you know I would not like to stay the night?” She asked.

“There is much I know, and much yet for you to know, that is just one of which you have yet to learn. I do know that should you choose to stay much longer, the fun you have been enjoying can easily turn to something that will set long in your mind. Should you decide to stay longer yet, some unpleasant event may turn your night to a lesser desirable memory. I will not choose for you, neither will I tell you which to choose, but I will be here for you when you need me, and you will have more need of me the longer you delay returning. Gilda is waiting for you, she can see only enough to fly by the lights cast from the town, once you reach the edge of town, you must make arrangements for her safe return. Can you do that?” He asked.

“I do not know, if I can not, then what should I do?” She asked in return.

“Should you be unable to help her, you must advise her of such and provide a safe-haven for her for the night. If she can sleep there the night through, she can return safely in the morning light.” He instructed.

“What sort of ‘safe-haven’ must I make?” Winnie sounded confused.

“Let the amulet guide you, it will let you know when all is good. Do not let the red haired girl touch the amulet. She has a gift she does not know of, should she touch the amulet, it could do her serious harm, and blemish the amulet for time to come. Hers is not a gift you should confront, nor should you let her to know of it. The less she knows

the better for you and I as well.” Merlin had a stern sound to his voice, one she had not heard before. This left her curious, and slightly scared.

“What red haired girl, I do not know who you are speaking of. I will do as you say, but I have allowed no one to see the amulet, much less touch it. You have me worried now, am I in danger?” There was a slight tremble in her voice.

“No. You are in no immediate danger, but the girl you will meet on the way to meet me is the one of whom I speak. She will be one of three; she is the shorter and the most friendly. You will be tempted to befriend her, you must not. Do not be rude, but do not trust her. Her intentions are pure and true, now. She will grow to be untrustworthy and a very worthy opponent to you. Should you have met her a year ago, she would have been an ally, but things have happened in her home to turn her tide, and it turned against her and all those who would trust her, especially those with potential power. If you must befriend any of the three, the tall slender, blonde one is in need of a good friend, you just may sway her to leave the influence of the others.

Do not confide in her, and do not lend her all of your trust until you are more certain of her allegiance than you will be on this night. First, tend to Gilda, then finish your eve of fun, then decide to stay or meet here with me. Follow your heart, guide it with your good sense, and be ever cautious, there are those who would have your undoing as good sport.” His image faded and her ears cleared of his voice, but she felt as though he was still there with her.

The amulet had returned to a soft pink glow, only enough to light the way to the entrance. She thought as she walked. The more she neared the entrance, the more she knew what she was to do. She was still mystified about the girls and the warnings, but she knew unequivocally that he was concerned enough to warn her and that he would not be wrong in anything that he would warn her of.

Calvin jumped from the can when she emerged, as if she had been gone an eternity. He was clumsy in his efforts, but he immediately threw his arms around her and attempted again to kiss her. She turned her head away and pushed him back as gently as she could but firm enough to make certain her position.

“Please. I do not wish to hurt your feelings, but this is not what I expected of you.” She explained in a kind and un-rejecting voice. “There may be a time when I might like you to kiss me, but right now I only want you to give me a hug, hold me for a minute and let me think. My mind is confused, my heart is lost, and you are the only friend I have to trust at this moment. I have never kissed a boy, and when I do, it will be because I would like to, not because he forced it on me.” She hoped she had not embarrassed nor hurt him.

“I thought you liked me. I thought that’s why ya wanted ta be here, alone in th’ dark, with me. Don’t ya like me?” He asked, almost sounding hurt.

“I do like you. I like you a lot. I just do not know if I like you that much, or that way.” She began to explain. “You are a really nice boy, you are good looking, and I enjoy talking to you. When I am around you my stomach feels like it has never before, and I feel warm all over. I like the way you make me feel. When we are not close, I want to see you again and I wonder how long it may be before I will. I think of you most of the time, and I wonder if you think the same of me. Do you?” She averted.

“I have took two other girls to th’ movies, I kissed ‘em both, I liked ‘em both. But I never liked either of ‘em like I do you. They aint as smart as you, and I don’t think

both of 'em together is as pretty as you. They wuz both older'n you, but you act older'n both of 'em together. I been waitin' ever since we met t' see if you'd come t' town an' see me. When ya did, I thought muh heart wuz gonna pound outta muh chest. It took alla muh nerve t, try t' kiss ya th' last time, now, when I tried again an' ya don't wanna, I wonder if ya even like me at all. Is it muh breath? I could chew some gum, er eat some cinnamon stix." He was perplexed.

Adrenalin coursing through her like wildfire in dry brush, Winnie tiptoed up and pressed her lips to his. Her head was pounding with excitement and stirred with confusion. Her heart was reaching new heights, and yet, she felt natural and normal. She held the kiss for a moment and then pulled back enough to look into the surprised eyes of the now completely overcome young man in her arms.

"Be quiet for a moment." She instructed. "Let that hold you until I am ready, but for now we need no more. I like you; I would like to see you more often. I do not wish this to be all we think of, nor all we see each other for. You are smarter than you let on to be, could be that is what I like. You are fun to be with, it could be that is what I like. You are handsome, it could be that, and it could be all of these things along with others, but I do not wish to know just now, and I do not wish to end this eve here doing this. I must be going, poppy is waiting for me and I do not like to think of him alone in the dark. There will be other times, I am certain, and I will let you know when. For now, You must help me find a hiding place for a friend, or arrange for me a way to where you picked me up, a way in secrecy."

"What are you sayin'?" He asked, confused.

"I need to go home tonight." She made up her mind in mid-sentence; it was easier than to attempt to explain. "I need to leave pretty soon, and I will need to have a ride to the point where you met me tonight. I would much rather not ask your parents, do you know of another way you could help me get there?" She asked, now pushing herself away gently.

"I thought ya wuz gonna stay th' night. Did ya change yer mind ' cause I tried t' kiss ya?" He asked, now perplexed and slightly hurt.

"No. It has nothing to do with you. I have matters at home that need tending to. I have really enjoyed my time with you tonight. I do not remember the last time I had so much fun. I have just overlooked some of my obligations and responsibilities, and now I must go take care of them." She explained the best she could and hoped she would not hurt his feelings.

"Will ya be comin' back?" He asked.

"Yes. I will be back, I do not know just when as yet, but we will have to work that out. I can let you know again the same way as last time. Will that be alright with you?" She attempted to end this part of the conversation expediently and painlessly.

"Ya said ya might come down fer Thanksgivin', is that still on?" He pressed.

"I do not know. I must go tonight, soon. Once I have tended to the matters at home, then, and only then can I know what plans I can lay for the future. Can you arrange for me a ride?" She asked again.

"Debbie has a car. She has been tryin' t' get me t' go fer a ride with her fer three months now. I reckon if I ask her, she'll be more 'n happy t' take ya, long as she gets me in her car." He responded with a half-bashful twist in his demeanor.

“ I need to put something in the car, in a bag, something that nobody else can look at. Can you help me to do that?” Winnie was afraid that this would be the part where she had to go into more detail.

“ What is it, a snipe?” Cal asked with a coy grin.

“ I can not tell you, but I do need you to arrange for the bag, and then for me to be able to put it in the car in secrecy.” Winnie prodded.

“ I can get a gunny sack frum out back of th’ hardware store, you kin put yer snipe in it when ya want, but they’re all gonna wanna touch it t’ see ya aint pullin their leg afore ya put it in th car.” He said, now leading her toward the hardware store. “ The hardest part of all of this is gonna be findin’ Debbie. It is Halloween and everbody is scattered an’ goin’ nuts. Once we find her, it’ll all go our way, aint nuthin’ like a snipe hunt on Halloween.” He was actually excited, he had no idea what was really about to transpire. His mind was already picturing he and Winnie in a great hiding place and making out.

There was a large wooden crate behind the hardware store, in it were discarded ‘gunny sacks’. They picked through them until they found one to suit Winnie’s needs. From there, they went to Main Street. Most of the kids who drove were ‘cruising main’. It was a seemingly endless procession of cars. First going north to the diner at one end of town, then back to the front of the library where two or three would occasionally stop and confer with each other in laughter and loud whoops, and then back into the ‘hunt’.

The police car was parked conveniently in the alley between Marge’s Beauty Salon and The Fixit Shoppe. Officer Darren Crenshaw was seated behind the wheel and happy to stay back in the shadows as long as everything was still ‘just in fun’. He felt lucky that the kids in this town were such a good bunch, he rarely had to intervene, most of the older kids in this town helped to keep the younger ones in line. He was aware of the few ‘outsiders’ who stood to make themselves known, and he had already confronted them each and let them know he would stand for no malarkey. Tonight had been a good Halloween, no real calls to speak of; he did have to take the Danager kid to the hospital though. He was playing with his father’s pistol and shot himself in the leg, outside of that, candy and pranks, and a happy Halloween.

They walked north on Main Street and talked as they watched for Debbie in a ‘54 Ford. The street was well lighted and they could see nearly to the end. There were a few other kids on foot, some in costumes, and others in Levis and winter jackets. It was cold, but not as cold as it had been in years past. Calvin was well known around town and was interrupted a few times to greet others as they passed. He had to tell Tommy Winniger to leave his little brother alone; he was picking on him again and trying to take away his ‘Pez’ dispenser. A couple of boys had recognized Winnie from the show she had put on at the school earlier and attempted to prod her into an encore. They finally gave up after Calvin threatened to have her turn them into frogs and said he would get the Melaney twins to tend to them. The Melaney twins were girls who, first were not too appealing in appearance, and second, enjoyed little more than antagonizing boys. As time would do to most, and unknown to anyone then, Mary Melaney would grow into the woman who would be second runner up in the state beauty Queen contest, but for now, her freckles and crooked teeth did her few other favors than to aid in her daunting endeavors. Their conversations were light and varied but neither of them was at a loss. They talked about going to school and how they both envied each other in differing instances. She envied

his popularity and being able to be with so many other kids so often. He envied her being tutored at home and being in the mountains away from the crowds so much of her life. They talked of the first day they met and made light of the tricks they had played on each other. He asked what made her go to that particular place for her walk that day, and told her how glad he was that she had. She told him that she liked to go there for the view of the river and on sunny days she could see the sun reflecting off the insulators on the power lines down the valley and how it made her think that they looked like diamonds in the trees shining up at her. She did not know they were insulators at first, and she really did not care, they were her diamonds in the trees and would ever remain so. Finally, they reached Mac's Diner. There were kids in the parking lot both on foot and in the parked cars, all out enjoying the music playing on the large speakers the owner had mounted on the two front corners of the Diner, the song on the speakers as they approached was "Peggy Sue" and Calvin told her that he liked Buddy Holley. They did not see Debbie's car in the lot, but if she got in trouble again and was afoot, she would be inside in a booth with Megan and Barb, her two 'best girlfriends'. They made their way inside avoiding magic requests and acknowledging 'cool costumes', not to mention 'coping' a French - fry from Bob McBride's extended offering.

Bob was the owner's son, a good-looking boy, but spoiled rotten. Calvin thought Bob acted too immature for a teenager, he said Bob tried too hard to be cool and never would make it. They found a booth with Cathy Stern and Greg Tomsick and asked if they could sit with them a bit to wait and see if Debbie was around. Greg and Cathy were going steady, they hoped to some day get engaged, but for now they had to finish high school, Greg had his eye on college in California, he was set on being a building engineer. Cathy said she would wait and just be happy to be his wife, college held no dreams of hers. They said that Debbie had been in earlier; she had gotten a couple of burgers, fries, and three malteds. She did have her car then, but the way she drives, she could have had it taken away again by now. No sooner than that had been said than Megan Peters, Debbie's friend, came in the front door and Cathy yelled; "Meg, over here. They been lookin' for ya." To that Megan turned from the counter where she had originally headed and strode to their booth.

"What's up, Cal? Lookin' fer a ride t'night?" She asked running her forefinger along the jacket seam on Calvin's shoulder. Her voice carried a teasing tone, but she knew well that if she tried anything with him Debbie would scratch her eyes out.

"I got somethin' goin' if you girls are up t' a little fun." Calvin answered, throwing out a string line of his own.

"Ya gonna take th' little witch with ya, or ya finally gonna give Debbie her shot?" Her tone was still daunting, but it sounded less friendly now.

"Winnie's got th' main ingredient t' th' whole thing. B'sides, who's t' tell how th' night's gonna end? You know, who's gonna end up with who? Ya know what I mean,.. 'KITTEN'?" He ended with a wink and a coy smile.

Megan was excited and confused, but she could not let on. She kept her smile contained, even though she believed that he had just flirted with her. Her shoulder length red hair was pulled into a neat ponytail and swayed from side to side as she turned and strutted toward the door. "I'll see what Deb's gotta say and let ya know." She announced over her shoulder. It was all she could do to keep from running, she could hardly wait to tell Debbie that Calvin was inside and wanted to go with them. She did

not get into the car; she hopped the last two steps to the driver's side window and stuck her head in. Debbie almost knocked her down opening the door to go inside and talk to Calvin herself.

“ Saaayyy big boy! What's this I hear ya got somethin' cookin fer us t'night?” She yelled across the diner as she entered the door and strutted to where they sat. Her long brown ponytail was hanging over her right shoulder and she twisted the end of it with her thumb and forefinger as she made her presence known. When she reached their booth, she sat down next to Calvin, forcing him to scoot over tight to Winnie.

“ Yea, I got something cookin', not s' sure you girls kin handle it though.” He had to make it a challenge, or she would loose interest quickly.

“ Oh, I think I can handle anything you can dish out, and if I cant, I'm sure gonna have fun tryin'!” She responded coyly, putting her left elbow up on his right shoulder and half-growling, as she looked deep into his eyes. “ Whatcha got?”

“ Winnie's got a snipe stashed away. She says she kin get it in a bag and has a place outta town where she kin let it go. She says we all kin hunt it and th' one whut catches it, gets t' go with me t' th' movies next Saturday. Whatcha say? Ya game?” He had to throw in the movie offer; she did not look to be taking the bait until the stakes were higher.

“ How come she's willing t' give up th' movies with you? Aint she got it cinched?”

Feminine curiosity pushed the question out before she realized she had asked it.

“ He had not decided to go at all until I asked him to take me. Then he said he was going to ask you, I thought this would be the fair way to decide. What do you think? Will you compete, or would you allow me to win him without your interference?” Winnie did not like being this close to a lie. As facts had it, he had not decided to go anywhere until she had asked him to take her home. Then he did say he would ask Debbie to give her a ride, this did not make it exactly right, but it was a time in need, and she was only going along. She had no idea what a 'snipe' was, nor where she would get one, but she did know it would have to share the bag with Gilda, for a while anyway.

Debbie's eyes narrowed slightly and she felt new hopes of getting near to the boy who had eluded her for a long time. This was the most he had talked to her in a very long time; she did not wish to mess this up. She had only heard of 'snipe hunts' and never been involved in any. She felt she was a tough girl and anything 'Goldilocks' could do, she could do better and more often. She came from a family with money, not rich, just not bad off. Her dad owned Kindred Sales, the Ford dealership, not to mention the Green Serpent bar on Main Street. They had a few houses in town they rented out and her mother, Betty, was in real-estate sales.

“ Yer on!” She exclaimed with a gleam in her eyes. “ When do we go, and where?”

“ Give us five minutes an meet us out back of th' chainman's café.” Calvin answered.

Greg wanted to join in on the fun, but Cathy was not in for those 'country games' and chose to abstain. The girls in the booth behind them overheard and wanted to come too, Debbie was reluctant to add to the competition, Georgia Hale had already dated Calvin once and wished to do so again.

“ If you can get yer own ride to the release spot, you can hunt. My car’s full.” Debbie snapped. She was surprised to hear Kevin Murphy volunteer to take them. He had organized one of these before and wanted to see the fun.

Debbie rose to her feet and hurried out the door before a crowd could grow and walking backward the last few steps reminded them; “ Five minutes behind the Chow Mien Café, don’t stand me up!”

To that Calvin and Winnie grabbed their remaining sodas and scurried out the door.

“ I dunno whut yer gonna put in that bag, but ya better get it and get it in there, we got five minutes to catch yer ride.” Calvin instructed as they exited and turned south on Main Street.

“ How far is the Chow Mien Café?” Winnie asked, watching a large dark shadow fly overhead in their direction of travel.

“ That’s it right there.” He answered as he pointed to the building only a block away and on the opposite side of the street.

“ Good, you go around one side, and I will go around the other. I will meet you in the rear. This way we will know we are alone when we meet Debbie.” Winnie instructed.

“ We don’t need t’ do that, we’ll be alone. Nobody goes ‘round there but th’ chinaman, and he only goes there t’ take out th’ garbage.” He replied.

“ Look, there is something I must do in privacy, now please, respect my wishes.” Winnie insisted.

“ Ya can’t do that down there. ‘Sides, why didn’t ya do it in th’ diner?” He asked.

“ It is not that, I am not that silly. Please allow me this brief moment in privacy.” She insisted.

“ Yer th’ privatest person ever I knew. If that’s whut ya want, ya got it, but dang if ya aint drivin me nuts.” He relented.

By this time they had reached the front of the café, Winnie started down the closest side and Calvin ran to the other. Once he was out of sight, she returned to the lighted street and beckoned Gilda to come to her with a gesture. As soon as she seen the first glimpse of flight, she stepped back into the darkness between the buildings. Gilda landed on a large cardboard box just inside the opening and cocked her head curiously from side to side.

“ Gilda, neither do I like what we must do, nor will you, but it is the only way I could conceive to do what we must. I have a bag and you must get in it. You must, and you must stay in it and not utter a sound at any cost. Then I must put you in a dark place in a car so we may get a ride out of town, from there you need only stay in the bag a short while. Will you help me?”

“ Hello, Winnie. Why, yes, I am fine thank you. It is nice to see you too.” Gilda spewed in sarcasm.

“ Alright! Hello. I am glad to see you and I am sorry I have been rude. Now please, we do not have much time.” Winnie relented.

“ There is never enough time for politeness, nor true friends. But ever and always time enough to hurry into impolite inconveniences.” Gilda muttered as she lowered her head and walked sulking into the bag in an obvious attempt to solicit sympathy.

Winnie quickly closed the bag and gently placed it over her shoulder as she proceeded around to the rendezvous point. Calvin was already waiting and had almost made it around the corner to see what was keeping her. They nearly bumped into each other and had to stop abruptly to avoid the collision. Calvin could not help noticing the large lump in the bag as Winnie gently retrieved it from her shoulder and placed it on the broken wooden crate beside her.

“ Hey! Whutcha got in there?” He asked with a half-chuckle as he attempted to poke at the bag with a gesturing finger.

“ It is a secret, and as I told you, nobody must be allowed to look inside.” Winnie said defensively as she blocked his hand and looked pleadingly into his eyes.

“ Whutever you say.” He yielded. “ But ya know everyone is gonna wanna see it, most of em is gonna wanna touch it. Ya know, th’ magic ya did is gonna set about a buncha doubts, whutcha gonna do ‘bout thet?” He now posed a quandary she had overlooked, and quickly adapted good use for.

“ What is in the bag is a product of magic.” She began to explain. Knowing that the union of the three within Gilda was, in fact, the production of magic, hence, no lie. “ It must be treated with much respect, as it does think, can speak when I request it to, and is very special in many ways. It can be harmed, and should any harm come to it I would be held fully responsible. It is very dear to me, and has been of service to you and I. Please, help me to protect and keep it safe.”

“ I got no reason t’ doubt yer word, if you say so, then I’ll help ya eny way I can. Ya shure do make things hard fer a guy.” Calvin said, looking into her eyes. Much to his surprise, she tiptoed up and pecked a light kiss on his lips.

No sooner was that said, than a 1954 Ford with three girls in the front seat sped around the corner and into the alley where hey stood. It was Debbie and her faithful followers.

Barbara Miller was not always with Debbie and Megan, but she was getting to spend more and more time with them. Barb’s mother had insisted she bleach her hair, it was normally a ‘dishwater blonde’, but her mother thought she would be more popular if she were more ‘true-blonde’. She was most affable to most, but she bent more and more to the whims of Debbie. She only wished to fit in and be friendly, Debbie and Megan were talking about forming an all girl club and that made her feel like she was getting in on the ground floor. So far, the all girl club consisted of only the three, but maybe it could include this new girl and her magic act. She just might teach them how she does it.

The car came to an abrupt halt only a few feet from where Calvin stood as he turned to see Debbie with a fixed stare from behind the steering wheel and a near demonic grin as she chewed her Beechnut gum in defiance of all who dared look her in the eyes. She had tried to scare him, and if she knew how close she came to it, she may have actually hit him just to set the point home. Her window was rolled down and she leaned out in a cocky attitude and yelled.

“ So, ya got a bag. Whatcha got in it?”

“I tole’ ya, she’s gotta snipe, didn’t I?” Calvin yelled back in defiance. “ Here goes.” He warned Winnie, almost beneath his breath.

Both front doors opened and girls piled out of each. Debbie was first and quickest to confront them. She reached out both hands and demanded. “ Lemme see! I aint never seen a snipe before.”

Calvin jumped in and blocked her attempt and Winnie pulled the bag up and close to her protecting it with all of her abilities.

“No!” Winnie exclaimed. “Nobody looks into the bag until we reach the drop off, then I will open it and turn the contents out. Then and only then will the hunt begin. I will hold the bag on my lap, you may look at it, you may ask of it, and given that the question is reasonable, I may request it to answer of it’s own accord. However, under no circumstances is any harm to come to it in any way lest I should terminate the entire event. Is that understood?” She was firm, but she was also afraid that she may have taken on more than she could control. She knew that if she could gain control in the beginning, keeping it would be a much less challenge.

Megan’s eyes were so large they nearly opened to the top of her head. “Can it really talk? I didn’t know snakes could talk. Can you make it talk now?” She was nearly childish in her actions and excitement.

“Yes, it can talk.” Winnie answered, almost giving away her attachment to the bag’s contents with her nearly affectionate tones. “I do not ‘make’ it talk, I request its indulgence, and should it be so inclined, it will respond. I have grown quite fond of it in the time I have been in it’s company, should you give it the same reverence, you too may grow fond of it.”

“Alright!” Debbie commanded. “Lets stop muttering and get this show on the road. You can hold it in your lap if ya want, but it better not make a mess in my car.” With that she turned and marched to the driver’s side and entered the car closing the door behind her showing she was in charge and if anyone else wanted to get in, they would have to get in on the other side.

Megan held the door open and the seat up for Calvin and Winnie to enter, then pushed Barb into the middle, she insisted on sitting by the door. She had a better view from the door, not to mention the boys could see her better if she was on the outside.

The engine roared to life again and Debbie piloted the car around to Main Street screeching the tires at every opportunity. The young occupants were tossed back and forth on their wild ride until Calvin instructed Debbie to slow down or he would get out and never ride with her again. She was reluctant and did not wish to yield to any ‘pansy-ways’, but she did not wish to lose any future hopes of being with Calvin. As they headed down Main Street, they began to gather a collection of followers who also wished to join in on a ‘snipe hunt’. Some of the cars going in the opposite direction would ‘flip a uie’ and quickly follow the procession. Before they had reached the edge of town there were a total of five cars in their parade, all full of expectant ‘snipe hunters’. Most of the boys knew that there was no such thing as a ‘snipe’; this was just a way to get out of town and be alone with your favorite girl in the dark. The girls who knew were not letting on; this game could be played both ways. The driver of the last car in the procession was Bob McBride, he had managed to convince his father that he was necessary to drive the last few guys to the hunt, and Mr. McBride loaned him the family station wagon, which now carried Bob, Tommy Winniger and Donnie Harding. Donnie and Tommy were pals from a long time ago, and Donnie thought that this would be just the thing to get Tommy to leave his little brother alone and maybe take up a stronger interest in girls. The car in front of them was full of girls, including the Melaney twins. Neither did these boys notice the police car that kept a reasonable distance in their rear, nor did they know that in time Tommy would marry Margret Melaney and raise twins of their own. Nor did

Donnie let anyone know of his secret desires, which included Margret. The dusty road spewed large billows of dust as the motorcade worked its way to the opening that led to the Finch's driveway. The smell of sage was strong and the night air was crisp. The stars were hidden for the most part by clouds, which were beginning to fill the sky and gave an eerie effect as they passed in front of the three-quarter moon. Calvin could smell the oncoming snow and knew that this hunt should get over quickly, he even wondered if it were such a good idea. He was certain that this snow could be the 'big one' they had been expecting, and had not yet received this year.

The conversations in the car were all directed toward and about the bag, and its contents. There had been only one attempt to snatch it from Winnie, but Barb was no match for Winnie. All of the girls were completely awestruck when Debbie had asked the bag what would be the prize for the person who caught the snipe and it answered in a deep voice. Gilda could not help putting this smart aleck in her place.

"First, one must be smart enough to catch a snipe before one should worry of the consequences. However, provided one should become so lucky as to achieve such a feat, it would be more of a surprise than a prize. Should you become so lucky, I will assure you now, the surprise you would receive would be one you would not soon forget."

Megan was startled and taken aback, she could not think of a word to say until Barb asked the bag what would be her prize. Before the response could begin, Megan snapped at her.

"Don't you know nuthin'? There aint no snipe in that bag, it's just a dummy and she's throwing her voice to fool us. Don't be so dumb!"

In response to that comment, Winnie placed both of her hands over her mouth after she asked the 'snipe' for its opinion on that.

"Were I a dummy, what then would you be? Who would ask questions of a lesser intelligent source, lest they themselves were not so bright?" Gilda responded.

The car filled with laughter, none of which was Megan's. She tried desperately to think of something with which to respond in kind and could not. She sat in silence, embarrassed until the car came to a halt at the Finch's road. The night filled with young people jumping and dancing around waiting for Winnie to open the bag and begin the hunt.

Calvin took charge, he instructed everyone to form a large circle and stand hand in hand. When they had settled down, he told them what was to happen. Winnie was glad he took charge, she was uncertain as to what to do at this point, and she hoped he knew what he was doing.